

Identity and Immortality

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1. *Identity over time, in life.* What, if anything, makes you identical with the baby you were? Candidate answers: *bodily continuity* as a human animal; *social recognition* as an individual occupying a network of on-going relationships; *psychological continuity*, as a person stitched to past and future via causal connections of memories and plans; a continuing *locus of consciousness*; an enduring spiritual substance or *soul*. How these differ. How some might be necessary for identity, or evidence for it, without constituting it. How some might involve ‘survival’, rather than strict identity.

2. *Identity over time, after death.* Which might enable survival after death? Only the last three seem to have any promise, and then not much. Such belief might be faith, a moral demand, or an illusion arising from wishful thinking and oppression; or in apparent intuitions about the necessity of your existence, and the contingency of your association with a particular body, or even a particular person.

4. *Apparent necessity of one’s existence.* We ourselves are ‘always around’, ‘coeval with the appearance and reappearance of the world’ (Johnston). There is a sense in which our non-existence is inconceivable. Descartes’s version: *necessarily, if I think I exist, I exist*. Sankara’s version: *if I think I exist, I necessarily exist*—which might, excitingly, imply immortality. But neither justifies belief in a thinking substance or soul, let alone an immortal one.

5. *Apparent contingency of association with particular body, or person.* First personal imagination: imagined features are self-ascribed, and imagined ‘from the inside’. Fluidity. Imagining oneself as a person or a center of consciousness, existing with a different *body* (brain transplants, teleporters), or disembodied (Plato, Descartes). Imagining oneself as a different *person*: ‘There goes Fred. There but for the grace of God go I’. We seem to project a bare, attenuated self into other places and times, other bodies, and other people; *this* particular window on the world could have been looking out instead through their eyes (Johnston, Lewis, Williams). But this feat doesn’t mean it’s possible. (Leibniz).

6. *Mistaken, though tempting, combination.* Apparent necessity of one’s existence: harder to countenance a future non-existence. Apparent contingency of association with a particular body, or even person: easier to countenance a future existence in exotic forms, associated with a different body, or no body, or as a different person. If mistaken: sad news? Perhaps not. (Lucretius)

7. *The point of first personal imagining.* Power of self-projection used in many ways: in engaging with fiction, in planning for the future—and in making the prospect of immortality more intelligible than it is. It enables us to put ourselves into our own future shoes, the shoes of fictional characters—or the shoes of *others*. A primary function is *empathy*, which (despite dangers and limits), yields quasi-first personal knowledge ‘from the inside’ of the situations of our fellows: a promising epistemic resource, if we take it to offer knowledge, not of our immortal souls, but of each other.

1. *Hume.* All doctrines are to be suspected which are favoured by our passions; and the hopes and fears which gave rise to this doctrine are very obvious.

2. *Descartes.* [T]he proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind (*Meditation I. 25*).

3. *Sankara.* Just because it is the Self, it is impossible for us to entertain the idea even of its being capable of refutation. [...] And to refute such a self-established entity is impossible... And as the nature of the Self is eternal presence, it cannot undergo destruction even when the body is reduced to ashes.

4. *Milinda Panha*. ‘Now, is it the same flame that burns in the first watch of the night, Sir, and in the second?’ ‘No.’ [...] ‘Then is there one lamp in the first watch, and another in the second, and another in the third?’ ‘No. The light comes from the same lamp all the night through.’ ‘Just so, O king, is the continuity of a person or thing maintained. One comes into being, another passes away; and the rebirth is, as it were, simultaneous [...]
5. *Lewis*. Here am I, there goes poor Fred; there but for the grace of God go I; how lucky I am to be me, not him. Where there is luck, there must be contingency. I am contemplating the possibility of my being poor Fred, and rejoicing that it is unrealized. (Lewis 1983, 395)
6. *Williams*. What could be the difference between the actual Napoleon and the imagined one? All I have to take to him in the imagined world is a Cartesian centre of consciousness; and that, the real Napoleon had already. Leibniz, perhaps, made something like this point when he said to one who expressed the wish that he were the King of China, that all he wanted was that he should cease to exist and there should be a King in China. (1973, 42)
7. *Lucretius*. Look back at the eternity that passed before we were born, and mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing. This is a mirror that Nature holds up to us, in which we may see the time that shall be after we are dead. Is there anything terrifying in the sight—anything depressing—anything that is not more restful than the soundest sleep?
8. *Smith*. Pity or compassion [is] the emotion we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. [These] interest [a man] in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. (Smith, 1759, I.I.1.1.)
9. *Hare*. [A] certain power of imagination and a readiness to use it is a...necessary ingredient in moral arguments (1963, 94). I have to know what it will be *like* for [the person]. We shall have to keep carefully in mind the distinction between knowing that something is happening to someone, and knowing *what it is like for him*. It is the latter kind of knowledge which, I am proposing, we should treat as relevant, and as required for the full information which rationality in making moral judgements demands (1981, 91-2)
10. *Batson* (instructions from altruism study). ‘Read the information in the communicator’s notes carefully, trying to take the perspective of the individual writing the notes. Try to imagine how this individual feels about what he or she writes’. ‘Read the information in the communicator’s notes carefully, trying to be as objective as possible’.

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