

Class #12 - Personal Identity

I. Personal Identity

In philosophy, we look for true answers to difficult questions.
The evidence for our answers may be difficult to establish.
Our answers remain debatable.
Sometimes, we decide that the questions are poorly formed, as Wittgenstein says about the skeptical question.

We are starting a unit on personal identity.
The questions we are pursuing concern the nature of our selves.
Who are we?
What makes us the same people that we were when we were young?
What makes us the same as we grow older?
Is there a core set of properties that are consistent over our lives?
Is there even something called the self, or are we just a bundle of properties, with no unifying thing?
Is there some haecceity (or thisness) to the self?

II. Material Constitution and the Body Theory

One answer to the question of the constitution of our identity, one that would be consistent with our general, contemporary preference for materialism, is that we are identical with our bodies.
We can call this the body theory of personal identity.
The problem with the body theory is that our bodies are changing constantly.
We lose skin and hair all the time; most dust is just dead skin and hair.
Every seven years, all the cells in our bodies are replaced.
If we identify ourselves with our bodies, we are not the same person we were, say, a moment ago.
(And, my son is made out of chicken nuggets and noodles.)

The problems with the body theory underlie the debtor's paradox.
The debtor's paradox says that one never owes anyone.
I am not the same person who took out the loan, so I can't be held for it.

The problem of personal identity is related to a general problem of material constitution.
Consider the ship of Theseus, just a ship made of wood.
We can replace any rotten plank without making a difference to the object; it's still Theseus's ship.
But what if we replace all of the planks, one at a time?
On the one hand, each replacement yields the same ship; the resulting ship is still Theseus's ship.
On the other hand, all the material in the ship is different.
It seems as if we shouldn't have Theseus's ship.
Further, let's imagine that the planks we replaced were not rotten.
We can reconstruct the original ship with the planks we removed.
Now we have two ships; which one is Theseus's ship?
We have reasons to think that both of them are, but that seems to create two ships out of one!
If they are both the single ship of Theseus, then it seems as if the same material object can exist in two places at once.

Actually, I have a [sukkah](#) just like this.
It's a structure made of wooden planks, and some cloth on the outside.
I can change the planks, I can change the cloth; it's still my sukkah.

Consider the general principle that no two material objects can be in the same place.
Now, consider Chrysippus's example of Dion and Theon.
Dion is a normal person.
'Theon' is the name we can give to all of Dion except his right foot.
Now, remove Dion's right foot.
Theon remains, since we didn't touch him at all.
Dion only lost his foot, so he should remain.
But, if he does remain, then we violate the principle that one place can't house two different objects.

Consider a lump of clay; call it Lump.
Make it into a statue, of, say, Joan Stewart; call it Joan.
Is Joan different from Lump?
On the one hand, we want to say so.
On the other hand, Lump and Joan have different properties.
They were created at different times.
Lump isn't destroyed, when Joan is.

One response to the Lump/Joan problem is to admit coincidental objects, accept that two material objects can be in the same place.
That makes counting the objects in the world really kind of odd.
Instead of there being one object where I'm sitting, my body, there are lots and lots of objects here.
We won't pursue the coincidental objects solution.
But, these considerations might make us wonder about our own constitution, and the view that our selves are connected to our bodies.

II. Heinlein's "All You Zombies"

Heinlein's "All You Zombies" raises interesting questions both about time and the nature of the self.
[Here is a timeline](#) that might help you understand the story.

Time-travel stories seem to presume B-theories of time, or at least a moving-spotlight version of the A-theory.

In such stories, people travel between points in time as we travel through points in space.
Such stories presuppose that the past and future are as real as the present.
There is thus a natural anti-presentist presumption about time in all time-travel stories.
Heinlein notices some weirdness that arises from taking all moments in time to be equally real.
The protagonist of the story ends up being her/his own parent.
And weirder.
All of the characters in the story are, in the end, identical.
Who, or what, is the character in the story?

If the presuppositions around time travel entail that such stories are possible, then perhaps that's a *reductio* argument on its possibility.
Taking "All You Zombies" as a *reductio* on the possibility of time travel could undermine our beliefs in

the B-theory, favoring the A-theory.

If the B-theory is supported by our time-travel intuitions, that is if the A-theory is counter-intuitive because it does not support time-travel, then we might see Heinlein's story as supporting the A-theory.

It's probably not very scientific to base any conclusions about the nature of time on such ruminations about time travel.

Time-travel, in the way it's depicted in science fiction, is likely impossible.

But it may be an interesting consideration in tweaking or illustrating our intuitions.

And it does seem to point to a weakness in Zimmerman's intuitive defense of the A-theory.

While "All You Zombies" is interesting in part for its illustration of views of time, it also raises questions about personhood.

The character in the story is a single person, with both sexes, and his/her own parents.

The possibilities strain our credulity past the breaking point.

But we will, over the next few weeks, think about other kinds of possibilities which raise questions about our identity.

III. Identity and Memory

One difference between the questions about the identity of Theseus's ship and the identity of the protagonist in "All You Zombies" is that the former concerns a material object and the latter concerns a person.

Material objects can be divided into two kinds: artifacts, which are things that we make, and natural kinds, which are things that we discover.

Among artifacts are ships and cell phones.

Among natural kinds are trees and animals.

Identity conditions for artifacts, explanations about what makes a ship the same ship over time, are tricky to construct for fairly obvious reasons.

We can replace a plank in the ship without much caring about whether the ship is the same one or not.

Insurance companies have some interests in identity conditions over time for our artifacts.

But they just work out a practical solution that doesn't rely on any deep truth about the constancy of objects.

In contrast, questions about the identity of some natural kinds are more interesting.

In particular, questions about identities of persons seem to be much more important to us.

Am I the same person that I was when I was little?

Is there some core of me which remains constant over time?

I don't seem to change who I am when I lose some skin or gain some weight.

Even if I lose a limb, it is me who is losing a limb and me who gains an artificial one.

Or are people just like artifacts for which there may be no facts about identity over time?

One phenomenon which leads us to believe that we maintain an identity over time is memory.

No one really knows how memory works.

But it does seem to be largely [constructed](#); article [here](#).

Some movies, especially *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, do a good job of evoking the reconstruction of memory.

One question for us concerns the relation of memory to our identity, a question we will see explicitly in our discussion of Locke and Reid.