

Class #11 - 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?
Haecceity: thisness

II. Material Constitution and the Body Theory

One answer to the question of in what our identity consists, 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 all of Dion except the 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.
We won't pursue that solution here.
But, these considerations might make us wonder about our own constitution, and the view that our selves are connected to our bodies.

II. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and Heinlein's "All You Zombies"

Heinlein's "All You Zombies" raises some interesting questions both about time and the nature of the self.

[Here is the timeline](#) we examined in class.
Time-travel stories seem to presume B-theories of time.
We can travel through time, a given block, as through space.
Of course, that's no argument for the B-theory, since 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.

One remarkable aspect of Heinlein's story is that all of the characters in the story are, in the end, identical.
Is Heinlein saying something about the possibility of time travel?
If the presuppositions around time travel entail that such stories are possible, then perhaps that's a *reductio* argument on its possibility.
We've moved from the mere possibility of time travel to a Parmenidean oneness.
Who, or what, is the character in the story?

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 as supporting 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.

In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, we are faced with a more-plausible story about personhood. The plot seems to be designed to set up a single scene at the end, illustrating the reverse of a troubled relationship.

Instead of happy memories and an unhappy present, we see a happy present with unhappy memories. Our interest in *Eternal Sunshine* has to do with questions about the connection between memory and identity.

In contrast to the shared dream states in *Inception*, the conversations in *Eternal Sunshine* are all in Joel’s mind.

The memories of others are thus portrayed as memories of oneself.

The movie does a good job of showing the reconstruction of memory, especially in the partially blank books and faces in Joel’s dreams.

Additionally, the movie raises questions about the nature of mind.

As we will see, later in the course, the assumptions underlying the process of cleansing in the movie may not be as contentious as they seem.

Indeed, if artificial intelligence is possible, it seems as if we should be able to do some sorts of cleaning. Still, the makers of *Eternal Sunshine* do not merely presume that our memories are simple text strings on some kind of hard drive.

They talk about the cleansing process as emotional core removal.

They do make a contentious assumption when they allow Patrick to know Joel’s thoughts from the outside.

While [mindreading appears to be possible](#), it’s hard to believe that complex thoughts will be easy to discern from brain states.

We’ll look more at some of these topics in philosophy of mind after break.

The big question for us is whether we remain the same person when our memories are erased.

We will see it explicitly later, in our discussion of Locke and Reid.