

PHIL 260: Persons & Values
Winter 2006; David O. Brink
Handout #1: Preliminaries

PERSONS

- Persons play an important “forensic” role (Locke, Essay II.xxvii.8, 15, 17-21, 23, 26). They are the bearers of rights and responsibilities and the object of special concern.
- Persons, as responsible agents, must be able to distinguish strength/authority of desires, to deliberate about the appropriateness of desires and form new desires, and to regulate their emotions and actions in accordance with their deliberations.
- If so, we should distinguish the normative category of person from the biological category of human beings. Not all humans are persons, and persons could fail to be humans.

PERSISTING SUBJECTS

Consider some of Aristotle’s claims about the logic of change. In Physics i 7 he claims that change presupposes the existence of persisting subjects. Change, he claims, requires three things:

- (a) an underlying subject of change,
- (b) a prechange, lack of quality or property, and
- (c) a postchange, possession of quality or property.

So any change has the form of some underlying subject x [(a)] going from possessing $\neg F$ [(b)] to a state of possessing F [(c)], or vice versa.

Aristotle claims that this structure is present in both **nonsubstantial change** -- when a single underlying substance (e.g. a candle) undergoes a change (e.g. heat makes a straight candle droop) -- and **substantial change** -- when a substance comes into being from some underlying matter or goes out of existence into some underlying matter (e.g. when a candle comes into existence from a lump of wax or melts into a pool of wax).

Persons are substances. They are subject to both substantial and nonsubstantial change. People persist through some physical and psychological changes, but not others.

DISTINCTIONS

We talk about identity and diversity in different ways that are easily confused but need to be distinguished.

- **Numeric** identity – one and the same substance.
- **Qualitative** identity – qualitatively indistinguishable
- **Compositional** identity – composed of the (numerically) same materials

Numeric identity (over time) appears to require neither compositional identity (e.g. the ship of Theseus persists even if some of its pine planks are replaced with numerically distinct pine planks) nor qualitative identity (e.g. the ship of Theseus persists if some of its pine planks are replaced with cedar planks or white planks replaced with pink planks).

PUZZLES ABOUT PERSISTENCE

One puzzle involving qualitative change appeals to Leibniz's Law (the indiscernibility of identicals), according to which identical things must have all and only the same properties.

1. A = the leaf at t1.
2. B = the leaf at t2.
3. A is F (e.g. green).
4. B is \neg F (e.g. red).
5. Hence, the leaf at t1 \neq the leaf at t2.

This puzzle is fairly easily dissolved; Leibniz's Law only requires that identicals be indiscernible **at the same time**. If A=B, then the leaf cannot be F and \neg F at either t1 or t2, but it can be F at t1 and \neg F at t2 (or vice versa).

Another puzzle involves compositional change. This puzzle has a familiar Heraclitean pedigree.

1. The river at t1 = water-1.
2. The river at t2 = water-2.
3. Water-1 \neq water-2.
4. Hence, river at t1 \neq river at t2.

This puzzle is a little trickier to dissolve.

(a) One view treats the persistent subject -- the river -- as a compound object created out of nonpersistent objects -- temporal slices of the river. The relationship is that of part to whole: the parts are four dimensional objects, and the whole is the temporally ordered series of such objects. If the expression "river at t..." refers to the whole, premises (1) and (2) are false. Alternatively, if the expression "river at t..." refers to a temporal part, then the argument as a whole is sound but (4) establishes nothing about the persistence of the river.

(b) Another solution is to reject (1) and (2) on the ground that objects are **constituted by** but not identical with the stuff out of which they are made (cf. the way that it is said that a statue is constituted by, but not identical, to the gold of which it is made).

CRITERIA OF IDENTITY

Philosophers often talk about criteria of identity in ways that are potentially ambiguous. We should distinguish **metaphysical** and **epistemic** criteria of identity.

- A metaphysical criterion of X tells us necessary and sufficient conditions of being X.
- An epistemological criterion of X tells us how to ascertain whether something is X.

This is like the distinction between essence and symptom. The fact that you have certain spots might be a reliable symptom (epistemological criterion) of your having chicken pox, but having chicken pox consists in having a certain virus (metaphysical criterion). Our inquiry is into the metaphysical issue about what personal identity consists in; but our metaphysical criterion must explain why our normal epistemic criteria are reliable.

REDUCTIONISM AND NONREDUCTIONISM

Parfit offers a bi-valent classification of conceptions of personal identity that is supposed help us sort historical and contemporary conceptions in a useful way.

- **Reductionism** claims that personal identity can be analyzed in terms of familiar facts about (e.g. relations among) the physical and/or psychological states of persons.
- **Nonreductionism** claims that personal identity cannot be analyzed in terms of such facts but must remain a "further fact" (cf. Parfit, Reasons and Persons, p. 210).

Reductionist views might be purely **psychological** (e.g. Locke, Grice, Quinton, Parfit, Shoemaker, Lewis, and Nozick), purely **physical** (e.g. Nagel), or **mixed** (e.g. Williams ?). Nonreductionist views either treat personal identity as **primitive and unanalyzable** (e.g. Butler and Reid) or think that it consists in the persistence of a **special** (typically) mental **entity**, the soul or ego (e.g. Plato or Descartes).

REDUCTIONISM ABOUT PHYSICAL OBJECTS

On a common view, the identity of physical objects consists in spatio-temporal continuity: an object persists just in case

1. the object traces an uninterrupted path through space and time;
2. the object at each point in the path is qualitatively similar (though not necessarily identical) to the object at the immediately previous point on the path; and
3. the existence of an object at each point on the path is counterfactually dependent on the existence of the object at the immediately previous point on the path.