Handout: Earl Conee & Ted Sider - “Personal Identity”

Framing the Problem: What Makes You *You* Over Time?

- **The central philosophical problem:** *What is the criterion of personal identity over time?* That is, what makes a person at one time the *same person* as a person at a different time?

- The question is not merely academic—it has real stakes:

    - **Legal:** Who should be punished for past crimes?

    - **Moral:** Who should feel regret or pride for past actions?

    - **Psychological:** Who can rationally anticipate future pleasures or pains?

- Sider dramatizes the issue through a **courtroom defense** in which the accused claims they are not the murderer—because they have changed significantly over time. This raises the ambiguity of the term **“same person”**:

    - *Qualitative sameness*: being alike in properties.

    - *Numerical sameness*: being one and the same entity.

 The real question is about **numerical identity**: what makes someone at one time *numerically identical* to someone at another?

Rejected Candidate #1: Sameness of Matter

- It might seem intuitive to say you are the same person if you are made of the same matter—but:

    - Matter constantly changes (haircuts, digestion, surgeries).

- It's possible that your atoms once belonged to someone else. But this doesn't make you *them*.

- **Conclusion:** Sameness of matter is neither necessary nor sufficient for personal identity.

Rejected Candidate #2: The Soul Theory

- Proposal: A person is the same over time if they have the *same immaterial soul*.

- **Advantages:**

  - Explains persistence through radical physical change.

  - Allows for survival after death (e.g., in religious contexts).

- **Critiques:**

  - **Empirical problems**: There's no evidence souls exist, and neuroscience increasingly explains mentality in terms of the brain.

  - **Explanatory deficit**: Soul theory offers no mechanism for *how* the soul thinks—unlike the brain, it lacks internal structure like neurons.

  - **Duplication ambiguity**: If souls exist, how would we track them? Which of two duplicate persons has the "original" soul?

Scientific Theories of Personal Identity

1. Spatiotemporal Continuity Theory

- **Definition:** A person is numerically identical over time if there is a continuous path through space and time (a "causal chain") linking earlier and later persons.

- **Refinement:** The continuity must proceed *via persons*—a chain that ends in a puddle of soup after melting you doesn't count.

- **Challenge – Locke's Prince and the Cobbler Thought Experiment:**

    - The prince and cobbler swap psychologies.

    - According to **spatiotemporal continuity**, the person is identified with their body, so the cobbler's body houses the cobbler.

    - But intuitively, **memory and psychology** seem more relevant to personal identity—the prince (now in the cobbler's body) *remembers* committing a crime, so he should be punished.

2. Psychological Continuity Theory (Locke's View)

- **Definition:** A person is identical to an earlier person if they are psychologically continuous (same memories, character, intentions).

- **Advantages:**

    - Explains the intuitive result of Locke's prince/cobbler case.

    - Aligns with our practices of praise, blame, regret, anticipation.

- **Problem – Duplication (Williams' Objection):**

    - If two people are psychologically continuous with a single past person (e.g., Charles and Robert both with Guy Fawkes), then by transitivity of identity, they are the *same person*—an absurd result.

The Duplication Problem (Common to Both Theories)

- **The Problem:** If continuity (of any sort) defines personal identity, then multiple successors can all be *numerically* identical to the original—which leads to contradictions.

- **Examples:**

- Brain hemisphere split: both halves function and retain psychological traits—are both “you”? That would mean they’re the *same* person as each other.

Proposed Modifications:

1. **Non-Branching Continuity**:
    - Identity is preserved *only when* there is *no branching*. So in duplication cases, *you don’t survive* as either person.
    - Counterintuitive result: you should hope the second hemisphere *dies*, so that you continue in the other one.
2. **Parfit’s Radical Solution**:
    - **Identity is not what matters.**
    - What matters for survival, anticipation, etc., is *psychological continuity*, even if identity is not preserved.
    - In branching cases, though “you” cease to exist, everything important about you continues.
    - Analogy: We should focus on the *relations* that matter (psychological connections), not strict identity.
3. **Non-Numerical Conception of Identity**:
    - Challenge the assumption that personal identity is **numerical identity** (like ‘2 = 2’).
    - Suppose instead that *every* change, even gradual, results in a *new person*.
    - Baby pictures are not of you, strictly speaking—but of earlier stages in a *chain* of persons.
4. This is *radical metaphysics*, but worth considering to resolve deep paradoxes.

Philosophical Stakes and Reflections

- **Moral and Practical Relevance**: Our ideas of justice, responsibility, and life's meaning hinge on how we understand personal identity.
- **Philosophy's Role**: Pushes us to question our intuitive beliefs—perhaps even revise them when contradictions arise.
- **Key Tension**: We want a theory that both explains our psychological intuitions *and* holds up under extreme metaphysical cases like duplication.

Summary of Theories

Theory	Criterion of Identity	Major Objection
Matter-based	Same physical material	Matter changes constantly
Soul Theory	Same immaterial soul	No evidence; vague mechanism
Spatiotemporal Continuity	Unbroken physical continuity	Fails in psychological switch cases
Psychological Continuity	Continuity of memory/personality	Fails in duplication
Non-Branching Continuity	Identity only if no branching	Counterintuitive in survival cases
Parfit's View	Identity doesn't matter	Challenges common assumptions
Anti-Numerical Identity	Identity is not strict numerical	Requires radical belief revision