Personal identity as simple; the concept of a person as primitive

This handout follows the handouts on ‘Personal identity: psychological and physical continuity theories’ and ‘The characteristics associated with personhood’. You should read those handouts first.

PERSONS AS SOULS

Theories that analyse personal identity in terms of physical or psychological continuity face objections. We can argue that this shows that there are no (independent) necessary and sufficient conditions for being the same person. Personal identity is ‘simple’ – it cannot be equated to or derived from any other facts that are independent of the idea of a person.

The view that persons are souls is a version of this view. If persons are souls, then we can say that the continued existence of the soul is what personal identity consists in. In other words, having the same soul is necessary and sufficient for being the same person. However, that persons are souls is not an informative or separate criterion of personal identity. You can’t use the claim that persons are souls to discover whether someone is the same person or not. But this is a strength of the theory, its defenders claim. All the evidence of whether some creature is a person or the same person – its psychological characteristics or its continuity over time – is fallible. So personhood is not something that can be established on the basis of this kind of evidence. It must be independent of it – as souls are.

There are three arguments we could give for the view that persons are souls. First, that no other theory works. Second, religious doctrine – which we shan’t discuss. We turn to the third argument, from Descartes, now. (The argument is adapted from Meditation II.)

Descartes’ argument

Let us assume that you and I and Descartes are persons. What is it for each of us to exist? Which properties, if I lost them, would mean I would no longer be what I am? Suppose I didn’t have a body. For example, suppose that I am a disembodied mind that is telepathically being fed false experiences of having a body. Does this make sense? Would I be me? Yes, says Descartes. I can doubt whether I have a body. But I can’t doubt whether I exist. So even if I didn’t have a body, that wouldn’t show I didn’t exist. So having a body isn’t essential to continuing to exist as me.

What is? Well, just I cannot doubt that I exist, I cannot doubt that I think. If I were to doubt whether I existed, that would prove that I do exist – as something that thinks! Suppose I completely ceased to think – Descartes means ‘think’in the broadest sense, to cover any experience, imagining, willing, feeling or thought. Would I exist? In what sense?? We can conclude that to be a person is to be something that thinks, something that can exist without a body – a soul.
Locke’s objection
Many philosophers think that Descartes has not managed to show that souls can exist independently of the body. We won’t worry about that now. Our concern is, if there are souls, whether persons are souls.

John Locke argued that personal identity is comprised by our memories, not by the continued existence of my soul. Souls are distinct from thoughts; souls have thoughts, but they are not the same thing as thoughts. So suppose all my memories were swapped with those of another soul. Suppose, Locke says, the memories (but not the bodies or souls) of a prince and a pauper (a poor person) were swapped. It would make more sense to say that the prince wakes up in the body of the pauper rather than saying the pauper now remembers everything in the life of the prince and nothing in his own life. What makes me me is not having a particular soul, but the memories which my soul has had and has now.

THE CONCEPT OF A PERSON AS PRIMITIVE
The soul theory faces another important objection as well. One characteristic of a person is that of having ascribed both mental and physical characteristics. We talked as if persons were minds (or consciousness or souls) with bodies (or bodies with minds). But in *Individuals* (Ch. 3), Peter Strawson argues that understanding a person in this way faces a serious objection: Why do we ascribe mental characteristics to the very same thing, a person, as physical characteristics? If a person is mind + body, we shouldn’t. We should ascribe the mental characteristics to the mind, and the physical characteristics to the body.

Of course, your experiences depend on your body, e.g. what you experience depends on where this body is in space; or again, the experience of being touched depends on this body being touched. But this is only a causal dependency; and the experience is a characteristic of the mind and the spatial location or being touched are characteristics of the body.

This can’t be, says Strawson. First, notice that we cannot identify, or ascribe to ourselves, our own mental states without also being able to mental states to other people. To identity one’s experiences is only possible through learning at the same time what it means to ascribe experiences to other people. Any mental characteristic can be ascribed to other people, as well as myself. To understand the mental characteristic, e.g. ‘pain’, I have to be able to say of other people ‘he is in pain’.

But if mental characteristics are attributed to minds, while all physical characteristics are attributed to bodies, how can we identify other minds so as to ascribe mental characteristics to them? We have no experience of ‘minds’ on their own. So we have to ascribe mental characteristics to something that also has physical characteristics. Mental and physical characteristics have to be attributed to the same thing for us to ascribe mental characteristics to anything at all.

This means that we have to have the concept of something with mental and physical characteristics – the concept of a person – before we can have the concept of something with just mental characteristics. So we can’t explain what a person is by saying a mind + a body; we don’t know what a mind is unless we already know what a person is. We can only understand the idea of a mind (or soul or consciousness) by abstracting from the
idea of a person. Persons are not embodied souls; rather, souls, if they exist, are disembodied persons. The idea of a person, as something that has both physical and mental characteristics, is primitive. ‘Primitive’ here doesn’t mean ‘backward’ or ‘not civilized’, but logically primary. It comes first in order of explanation.

THE CONCEPT OF A PERSON AS NATURAL

The concept of a person picks out a ‘natural’ category. Just as there are rocks, plants, animals and so on, there are also ‘persons’. Persons, creatures who have both mental and physical characteristics, are a natural kind of thing. From the very first, our experience of the world involves experience of persons. As we come to think of ourselves as having mental characteristics, we understand that there are other physical creatures that do as well.

If persons were mind + body, a person would not be a natural thing, but a combination of two things which are, in essence, separate. We would not be able to satisfactorily explain why we naturally think in terms of persons as single unities, rather than always thinking in terms of souls and bodies. As we noted before, very many of the characteristics we ascribe to persons, such as writing a cheque, reading a book, etc. depend on one and the same thing having both mental and physical characteristics.

FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

We can still ask what distinguishes persons from other bodies. It is not enough to say ‘psychological attributes’. Animals have psychological attributes without being persons. So which psychological attributes must persons have?

In *Persons and Bodies* (Ch. 3), Lynne Rudder Baker argues that what it takes to be a person is self-awareness. A person, she argues, essentially has the capacity for a first-person perspective, ‘a perspective from which one thinks of oneself as an individual facing a world, as a subject distinct from everything else’.

Having a first-person perspective is more than just having a perspective. A dog has beliefs and desires and can reason about what it wants, so it has a perspective. But it doesn’t think of itself as anything, nor does it have a conception of its own perspective as unique and different from other possible perspectives. To have a first-person perspective is to be able to think of oneself and others as subjects of thought, and to think of one’s thoughts and experiences as one’s own.

Baker argues that first-person perspective explains the importance of being a person and the characteristics associated with personhood. A creature with this perspective is fundamentally different from one without it, and the concept of a person marks the difference. The first-person perspective is the ground and origin both of what matters about us and what matters to us. It enables us to be rational in the strong sense of evaluating our beliefs and desires. It enables us to be reflective about our experiences, feelings and motives and those of others. We have a conception of our own futures and we attempt to shape them creatively through our autonomous choices. It enables us to be responsible, because we know what we are doing, and choose to do what we do. We understand that we, personally, have done things, and would have done different things with different desires and beliefs. The first-person perspective, then, is the ground of our rationality and our moral agency.
But this theory of what a person is supports the view, shared by the soul theory, that personal identity is simple. We cannot judge that a first-person perspective is the same first-perspective as some previous one without judging whether it is the same person we are talking about. So personal identity cannot be analysed into independent necessary and sufficient conditions.