

Descartes On Personal Identity

What are the conditions of personal Identity? Do they require that persons be continuants? That they be aristotelian primary substances? That they have an inner nature (as explained by Broad), a set of supreme dispositional powers?

Ordinarily, we would say that a person is something which is capable of undergoing changes. If that is true of persons, then according to the reasoning we have used so far, persons are one sort of continuant. As we shall see, some philosophers have denied that persons are continuants. There are several questions here.

- 1) What attributes are essential to being in the natural class of persons?
- 2) For any particular person, what determines the numerical identity of that person
 - a) at a given time?
 - b) over a period of time?

In assuming for the sake of discussion that persons are continuants we have not, therefore, assumed that persons are primary substances in Aristotle's sense, though he certainly classified them as such.

Notice that question (1) has an important bearing on question (2). As Aristotle said, the conditions of a thing's numerical identity are logically connected with what kind or type the thing belongs to. Before we investigate conditions of numerical identity for persons or any other sort of entity, we need to establish what it is to be a thing of its type. In this case, we need to consider what attributes are essential to being a member of the natural class of persons. As this question shows, we have not left the problems of universal entirely behind.

What attributes are essential to personhood? Descartes thought that the answer to this as well as many other questions could be discovered by answering a more general question: What can I know with absolute certainty? He put this question into a special form: Is there anything about which it is impossible to have any grounds for doubt? The most extreme possibility for total deception or universal error would be if there were something which systematically arranges for me to take false propositions for true ones and true propositions for false ones. Is there anything that this hypothetical great deceiver could not deceive me about?

Descartes eventually concludes that there are many things he knows with absolute certainty but there is one proposition that is first in the order of discovering such knowledge. This is that, insofar as he is doubting or thinking anything, he could not be deceived about whether he exists. No matter how many false propositions he may be tricked into believing true, if he thinks "I exist", then that proposition could not be false, otherwise he could not think it. If that proposition were false then he could not be thinking anything, for he would not exist. In order to learn what the marks of absolutely certain knowledge are, Descartes asks what makes his certainty of his own existence possible.

He finds that there is nothing except the fact that he is thinking on which his certainty of his existence depends. Even if nothing else were true, this much is certain; that he exists, since he is

thinking. He finds that it is the characteristics of clearness and distinctness that this proposition has that makes his certainty of his existence possible. He says we may, therefore, take it for a rule that any proposition which is clear and distinct is also certainly true.

He constructs a long argument that aims at vindicating this rule. It will not be necessary for our present purposes to go into this argument. Let us just see what he does with this rule in determining the nature of persons.

Descartes argues that the only attribute of himself that makes it possible for him to be certain of his own existence is thinking. No proposition ascribing a physical attribute to him can be known with absolute certainty. This, he says, means that it is clearly and distinctly possible that he, as a thinking thing, exists at times when his body does not exist. He gives a number of illustrations to help make this possibility evident. One is the obvious fact that many of a human being's body-parts may be damaged or lost or replaced without affecting one's status as a person. We can think of other examples along these lines that he never imagined. Organ transplants are now routine. Descartes might have fantasized such a possibility but he does not record the fantasy if he did entertain it. As far as artificial organ substitutes, the most advanced things he was aware of were wooden legs or hooks replacing hands. Now, some limbs can be replaced with very durable and flexible manufactured substitutes. Good progress is being made in the development of artificial hearts and research is under way toward replacement of other major organs with artificial substitutes. Another fascinating technology that Descartes did not imagine is propagation of tissue outside the body from which it is taken. Skin cells may be taken from a person's body and multiplied in laboratory conditions and then transplanted to the original donor. Cell cloning, the growing of a complete individual from a single one of its cells has been achieved in some organisms. Cloning of complete human individuals from single cells is still fantastic science fiction but there is general agreement among scientists that this is not theoretically impossible.

Descartes thought he had a way of stretching theoretical possibility to the limit without having to anticipate such technological developments. This was to ask whether it is logically possible for X to exist without Y existing and vice versa.

If this is logically possible, then X and Y are things of different types. For any physical thing, he said, it is logically possible that it does not think or have any sort of consciousness at all. This is obvious in the case of things like lumps of wax or stones. But Descartes went much farther than that. It would, he said, be possible to construct a machine of the same design and complexity as the human body and such that it moved its limbs in the same way as a human being does even though it had no consciousness, feeling or thought. The essence of physical things does not include thought. What about the essence of thinking things? First, many familiar examples show that loss or damage to most body parts does not affect a person's identity. There are also familiar examples of losing the ability to use nearly every body part in which identity is not affected. Why? Because capacity for thought is not affected. People who are very nearly totally paralyzed, if they only are able to blink one eye or move a finger to communicate, report that their capacity to think has not been affected by this calamity and they have no doubts about who they are. But what about the brain? There is no known case of a person retaining the ability to think after total destruction or permanent massive malfunctioning of their brain.

Descartes' reply to this is simple. It is obvious that the existence of any and every physical thing may be doubted. But I cannot doubt my own existence. The entire physical universe might be no more than a dream or an elaborate hallucination I suffer due to the power of God or some clever demon. Even if I merely dream or hallucinate the existence of a physical universe, I would still know that I existed just because of the fact that I would be thinking that the physical universe exists (or that it doesn't exist).

So, it is possible that no physical things, including brains, exist even though I, a thinking thing, know myself to exist. He claims that this possibility is clear and distinct. Now, he says, if I am the kind of thing which could exist even though no physical thing existed, then I must not be a physical kind of thing. A thing's essential nature includes only what I clearly and distinctly perceive to necessarily belong to it and such that, without that, the thing would not exist. If I were the sort of thing whose essential attributes necessarily include some physical feature and all physical things may be doubted to exist, then I could doubt my existence. But it is impossible for me to doubt my existence. So, no physical feature, even having a brain, necessarily belongs to the set of my essential attributes.

Some other situations, not discussed by Descartes, might be presented as illustrating his main claim. Suppose that you fall asleep after having made an exhaustive study of your friend's body, including his brain. You have assembled a vast catalog of facts about his body, including a huge number of detailed records about every cell in his brain, all of its synaptic connections to other cells, every bit of the effects of ageing or damage to these cells. When you wake up, you feel strange and clumsy. When you move around you feel very awkward. You stand up, turn on the light and look in the mirror. There before you in the mirror stands not you but your friend. At least that is what you think at first. Upon examination, you discover that you now seem to have your friend's body. Thinking at first that, somehow, your brain has been transplanted into your friend's body, you do all the same CAT scans and PET scans on the brain in the body you now have and it appears to be the very brain about which you have a massive set of records, your friend's brain. Then someone with the body that you once called your body comes into the room expressing great shock and dismay at their predicament. A lengthy conversation between the two of you reveals that the person with the body that was yours is your friend. Elaborate study of this body reveals that it is the very body and brain that you had called yours.

What is the point of this little fantasy? Descartes would say that since we can clearly and distinctly conceive this possible state of affairs, it is logically evident that no person is numerically identical with the body he or she happens to have at any given time. Even if it were always true that each person has some body, it is not logically necessary that they have the body they happen to have, at the time they have it. If a person were numerically identical with his body or even numerically identical with their brain, then this fantasy would be absolutely inconceivable or manifestly impossible. But isn't it clearly and distinctly possible?

If Descartes is right about this, then he has a very simple criterion of personal identity. Same mind, same person. Criteria of bodily identity are not necessarily decisive as criteria of personal identity, even though they may be practically useful guides in most situations to identifying

persons. That I am the person I am is a fact which is immediately obvious to me by the mere fact of being conscious of my own thinking.

Descartes would say that even if he woke up with another person's body, he would know beyond any doubt that he is still the same person he was when he had the other body. It is not only certain that I exist as a thinking thing but the same immediate certainty of who I am is given by my very knowledge that I am thinking. Nothing more than being the thinking thing that I am is necessary to my being the person I am. Self-consciousness is something that I have whenever I am conscious at all. Self-consciousness is unlike any other form of consciousness. For any continuant substance other than me, it is possible to mis-identify it, mistake it for another, numerically different substance. No such mistake is possible for the kind of consciousness that I have of myself. The mind knows itself better than it knows anything else, according to Descartes.

The result is that, although minds and, therefore persons, are continuants, according to Descartes, persons are not, strictly speaking, primary substances in Aristotle's sense of that term. Minds are not physical things, there is no material feature whatever in their nature. Yet Minds are capable of undergoing changes. They think some things at one time; they think other things at other times. Remember that Descartes defines the attribute of thinking very broadly. It includes such states or activities as doubting, understanding, conceiving, affirming, denying, remembering, willing, and perceiving. If a person doubts that someone is knocking on the door and then later affirms that someone is knocking on the door then he or she has changed their state of mind, the first state being contrary to the second state. For that to happen, minds must be continuants, according to Descartes. For Descartes, minds are just like aristotelian primary substances, except they are immaterial. They have no material features.

This means that Descartes denies Aristotle's general metaphysical principle that change requires matter. Descartes accepted the principle for everything other than minds and God. This may raise the question of whether a mind is something repeatable. If they are particulars, then, by definition they are not repeatable. Aristotle thought that matter also accounted for the possibility that there could be two numerically nonidentical qualitatively identical primary substances. They are numerically different because the matter of one is numerically different from the matter of the other. If minds are immaterial, what is to prevent the existence of two qualitatively identical minds? Yet, if they were two, how could they be numerically nonidentical if they are immaterial? Descartes may say, because each is associated with a different body. But he also allows minds to exist in a disembodied state. So, let us ask a different question: Could there be two disembodied qualitatively identical minds, according to Descartes?

Descartes' conception of a person as essentially a thing that thinks means, according to him, that the principle of mereological identity is satisfied very easily by persons. A mind has all the same parts from one time to another for the simple reason that a mind's only part is itself. No mind consists of several things somehow joined together into a complex unity. By contrast, every physical thing does consist of several physical things joined together. Every physical particular is a complex particular, according to Descartes. This means that every physical particular is a sort of assemblage of separable parts or it is divisible into parts. Minds are continuant substances which are not divisible into parts.

Now, if Descartes could establish that minds are not divisible into parts, he would have a powerful argument for his theory that minds and bodies are different substances capable of existing independently of one another. And he needs some arguments other than his argument that they are independent because his clear and distinct idea of a mind does not contain any physical property and his clear and distinct idea of a body does not contain any psychological property. What he needs is to show that his clear and distinct idea of a mind includes properties that are incompatible with physical properties. If the clear and distinct idea of a mind could be shown to be the idea of an indivisible substance, that property would be incompatible with being physical since all physical things are necessarily divisible. At least, let us grant him the conclusion about the divisibility of physical substances for now.

How does he support the claim that thinking things are indivisible? Try assuming that a mind is divisible and see what the logical result would be. Suppose that some mind thinks “It is cold out but the sky is clear”. If that mind were to be divided into two parts, would the one part think “It is cold out” while the other part thought “The sky is clear”? If it were divided into nine parts, would one part think “It”, another part think “is”, another part think “cold” another part think “out” another part think “but”, another part think “the”, another part think “sky”, another part think “is” another part think “clear”. Could the division be into even more parts, so that some mind-part thought some part of “cold” and another thought some other part of “cold”? If this begins to seem like nonsense, Descartes would say, you are beginning to understand what’s wrong with the hypothesis that the mind is divisible. For a mind to think a certain thought is not a matter of it’s delegating parts of the task to parts of itself. When a mind thinks a thought, it is the whole mind which thinks a single thought. If a mind were the sort of thing that is divisible then it would at least have potentially separable parts and it would make sense to ask which of these potentially separable parts carries out the task of thinking that thought. If it is just one of these parts then we would be left to wonder what the other parts are doing. Isn’t the part that does the thinking the one that deserves to be called a mind? If the others don’t do any thinking why should they be called parts of a mind at all? Do the mind’s parts take turns at doing the thinking? If so, then isn’t that mind really several minds? But how many minds could one person have (or be)? If the mind were divisible into parts then why couldn’t each of these potentially separable parts be thinking different thoughts simultaneously? If they were, would each of the parts know what the other was thinking? If that were going on then would it make sense to say that I am thinking just one of those thoughts? If so, then who would these other thinking things be? Absurdities like these can be piled on top of one another without end if we suppose that the mind is divisible, according to Descartes.

Puzzles about mereological identity like that of the ship of Theseus are bound to crop up in the case of physical things. They don’t crop up in the case of persons, according to Descartes, because physical things are divisible whereas minds are not.

Though Descartes’ theory provides a simple criterion of personal identity, it is not without problems. One of these is the famous question of how an immaterial substance (the mind) can cause effects in a material substance, one’s own body. Even if he had a general answer to this question (as he apparently did not) we would be left with other questions such as why one does not have the same control over all of the parts of one’s body as one has over some of them. Descartes can only deal with this problem by proposing a theory about the nervous system but

this only sharpens the general problem about mind-body interaction. Nor does he have a way of accounting for the fact that a mind cannot interact with more than one body at a time. Also, we may ask, why couldn't two different minds interact with the same body? Or any number of minds, for that matter. Why couldn't a mind have a stone for a body if minds are utterly different from material things? Aristotle might well ask the question of what would differentiate two disembodied minds that had all the same thoughts. Not that this will ever actually happen, but it is a genuine philosophical question. Aristotle's concept of a person as a rational animal allows him to say that the matter of which one person's body is composed is numerically different from the matter of which the other person's body is composed. Since Minds are immaterial substances, this answer is not available to Descartes. He has only very unconvincing answers to questions about how a mind can exist during times when it is not conscious or thinking, as in deep sleep. Nor does he have any way of dealing with the possibility that God could annihilate him as a thinking substance, replace him with another, brand new, thinking substance having all the same memories, knowledge, personality traits, etc that he has. Would this new mind not also be firmly convinced that it was Rene Descartes? Or why couldn't God simply annihilate Descartes, the thinking mind, and replace it with some other mind, say, the mind of Thomas Hobbes, after having changed all of Hobbes' memories, beliefs, knowledge, etc., giving Hobbes the belief that he was Descartes. Would Hobbes have any way of discovering that this belief of his was false? Would it still be Hobbes, though? If not, who?

Finally, here are two real life puzzle cases. They are hard to deal with, no matter what your criterion of personal identity may be but they seem particularly difficult for Descartes.

(1) There are many well-documented cases of multiple personality. The story of one of these is well-known. It is the story recounted in the book, *The Three Faces of Eve*. Did different persons have control of the same body at different times in this case? Is there any way to argue that this was not the case without begging the question in favor of Descartes' view of the self?

(2) The human brain contains two cerebral hemispheres connected to one another by a large bundle of nerve fibers called the corpus callosum. It was not until the late 1950's that the function of these fibres became somewhat understood. Experiments by R. W. Perry and others have shown that the corpus callosum coordinates the activities of the two hemispheres in normal human beings. Certain patients who had been suffering from violent epileptic seizures submitted to surgery in which the corpus callosum was severed in an attempt to lessen the severity of their seizures. The operations were successful in that way. What Sperry observed after studying these patients after their operations was that each disconnected hemisphere develops its own private chain of learning and memory experiences which are actually inaccessible to recall through the opposite hemisphere. It is difficult to see how this discovery can be reconciled with Descartes' claim that the mind has an absolutely unified consciousness because of its indivisibility.