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Problems of Personal Identity: A Critical Study from the Aspect of Metaphysics

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Abstract:

In the history of philosophy, there exist various discussions on personal identity. Though, we do not usually raise questions on this in our daily life. In Indian philosophy, only the Buddhist school of philosophy has discussed personal identity distinctly, whereas in the rest of the schools, the discussions of personal identity are entwined with other discussions. The differences of opinions that arise from the questions regarding personal identity are - which criterion needs to be fulfilled for a person to be the same in the past and the present? What is the criterion of personhood? When does an entity become a person? How to distinguish between a person and a non-person? - These questions, however similar they may seem in the naked eye, are of different matters. Whenever we try to find the way to know the criterion to become a person, or how a person is the same person in two different times, we actually pose the question epistemologically. Again when we try to understand what we mean by having personhood, or what is essential for a person to remain the same in different times, we pose the questions metaphysically. I will discuss personal identity from metaphysical aspects. I will primarily try to find which criterion needs to be fulfilled for a person to remain the same continuously for a time being. Since I will only focus on the criterion, not how to know whether the criterion is sufficient, this is not an epistemological discussion.

Keywords: Person, Personal Identity, Metaphysics, Epistemology, Criterion, Thought Experiment.

Before getting into the discussions of personal identity one needs to understand the difference between synchronic identity and diachronic identity. Then one can understand diachronic identity properly. The flower vase in front of me and my favorite flower vase are the same - is an example of synchronic identity. The flower vase in front of me and the flower vase I bought several years ago is the same flower vase - is an example of diachronic identity. Finding the criterion for which we can say a person Pat time t is identical with a person Q at time t2, is the purpose of diachronic identity.

Diachronic identity is linked with personhood and metaphysical nature though it is different from the two. Many get confused with these three questions but I will discuss diachronic identity in my thesis. (Gasser and Stefan, 2012, pp. 1-3)

If we start with the etymological meaning of the term ‘person’, then we can see the word has evolved from old French ‘*persone*’ which in turn has evolved from Latin ‘*persona*’ that means actor's mask, character in a play.

Usually we mean individual by the word ‘person’ and sometimes we all refer to the individual's body through the word ‘person’. For example: “I would have a publicity photograph of my person at all times”. (Pearsall, 1998, pp. 1384-1385)

In the history of personal identity, the most eminent and primordial definition of person was offered by John Locke. The concept of ‘person’ for Locke is different from other related concepts like ‘man’ and ‘human being’.

According to Locke, ‘person’ stands for-

“... a thinking intelligent being , that has reason and reflection , and can consider itself as itself , the same thinking thing in different times and places ; which it does only by that cautiousness , which is inseparable from thinking, ...” (Nidditch, 1975, p.335)

According to John Locke, the necessary characteristics for being a person are thinking, self awareness and consciousness of the present and the past. According to him:

“Whatever has the consciousness of present and past action is the same person to whom they both belong. Had I the same consciousness that I saw the ark and Noah's flood as that I saw and overflowing of the Thames last winter, or as that I write now, I could no more doubt that I who write this now, that saw the Thames overflowed last winter, and that viewed the flood at the general deluge , was the same self , place that self in what sustains you please, than I that write this am the same myself now while I write (whether I consist of all the same substance material or immaterial, or no) that I was yesterday” (Locke, 1959, p.16.)

In Western Philosophy, the criterion of personal identity can be classified into three-physical continuity criterion, psychological continuity criterion and mixed criterion. After a short discussion on these three criterion, the limitations of accepting physical and psychological continuity criterion, I will advocate for the mixed criterion as the criterion of personal identity.

Physical Continuity Criterion: The supporters of physical continuity criterion say if two persons, one from the past and other from the present have physical continuity, then they are the same. So, their answers on the criterion that needs to be fulfilled for an entity to be a person is physical continuity criterion.

Physical criterion can be divided into two categories, one is the bodily criterion and the other one is the brain criterion. The bodily criterion says that two persons A and B, will be identical at time t^1 and t^2 if they have the same body. They will be identical even if their bodies aren't exactly the same in terms of matter which changes gradually throughout the time period starting from t^1 to t^2 , keeping in mind that the new matter is functionally absorbed into the living body. The brain criterion says two persons A and B will be the same at time t^1 and t^2 if they have the same brain. Bernard Williams's view on personal identity is a classic example of the vindication of bodily continuity as the key to unraveling the persistence problem and so is Judith Jarvis Thomson's. According to Thomson, people are their bodies. Whenever any person refers to himself or herself, he or she actually refers to his or her body. We are not embodied entities. In her theory on personal identity, Thomson used the term 'people' as a plural form of 'person'.

Psychological Continuity Criterion: John Locke is the propounder of psychological continuity criterion. He discussed this in the chapter "Identity and Diversity" of his book *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In his opinion, man and person are different and the criterion of their identities is different as well. Even when there are some psychological changes, but physical continuity remains the same, we can say a person X is the same in two different times. But the criterion of personhood is rationality, consciousness and self awareness. We cannot say a person X is the same in two different times unless there is continuity of rationality, consciousness and self awareness. He further stated that memory criterion is the primary criterion of personal identity. We cannot hold a person responsible for his past actions if he or she cannot remember them at present. Here, they are two different persons, they can be the same man but can never be the same person. According to Locke, memory or psychological continuity criterion is necessary and sufficient criterion for personal identity. According to Locke, a person can be encapsulated in the following way:

"is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it: It being impossible for anyone to perceive, without perceiving, that he does perceive." (Locke, 1979, p.135)

Joseph Butler, Thomas Reid also support psychological continuity criterion.

Mixed Criterion: Due to the limitations of both physical and psychological continuity criterion, some philosophers guided a new criterion - mixed criterion of personal identity. Two persons X and Y can be the same at time T and t, only if there exists brain and psychological continuity. Since the brain is a physical part and philosophers have mixed psychology with it, this criterion is a mixed criterion. Brain is the core of the body as well as the residence of psychological state, but the brain alone cannot be the criterion of personal identity. Hence, the brain with psychology is the criterion of personal identity.

The reason behind not accepting the brain, or the body or the psychology distinctly as the criterion of personal identity needs to be addressed firsthand to understand the need for a mixed criterion. Let us discuss the limitations of physical continuity criterion first.

Sydney Shoemaker has shed some light upon the limitations of physical continuity criterion by one of his thought experiments. Let us consider two persons, Brown and Robinson, who are physically similar. During a brain operation, mistakenly their brains have been interchanged. One of them has died. Now, the person with Robinson's head and Brown's brain is claiming himself as Brown and he has all the memories of Brown. Here, depending only upon the bodily continuity we cannot confirm the person as Robinson. The supporters of bodily continuity cannot answer specifically in this regard. The resulting person does not have Robinson's brain, and the brain is a part of the body. Here, the resulting person has Brown's brain and memory but does not have any of Brown's body. Supporters of bodily continuity criterion fail to explain anything conclusive in this regard.

Similarly, memory continuity criterion faces criticism too. John Locke thinks that a person can not be the same if he or she can not remember his or her past, and we can not hold such a person responsible for his or her past actions. He further explained with an example - a prince can wake up one fine morning and can claim himself as a cobbler having all of the cobbler's memories. Locke suggests that if the prince really has the memories of the cobbler, then he is the cobbler. Now the question is who the real cobbler is if both the prince and the cobbler claim to have the first person memory of the cobbler. Two persons can not be the same at the same time. Again, first person memory claims can never be verified. Third person's perspective can not distinguish who the prince is and who the cobbler is. If we accept memory continuity criterion, a person having dementia or who has lost memory entirely can never be the same person as before, which is an absurd conclusion.

The problems we face while accepting both physical and psychological continuity criterion, can be solved by accepting mixed criterion though the mixed criterion also has its own limitations.

Richard Gale is the propounder of mixed criterion. He tried to solve the fission problems that arose earlier. The solution is that more than fifty percent of a person is required to exist after transplantation to be recognized as the same person as before. He thinks that if we consider this, we can easily conclude that brain continuity is a criterion of personal identity. Since it is impossible to transplant more than fifty percent of someone's brain to two different persons, no objections can be raised against this. Let us suppose that part of X's brain is to be transplanted in a transmitted manner into two different persons Y and Z. Now if more than fifty percent of X's brain is transplanted to Y, say fifty one percent. Then, Z will never get more than forty nine percent at the same time. Therefore it is evident that more than fifty percent of X's brain cannot be transplanted into both Y and Z. (Gale, 1969, pp. 193-195)

This - more than 50% of the brain along with psychological components - criterion can solve the problems regarding memory continuity criterion. The problem of prince and cobbler, where both of them claim to be the cobbler can be solved by suggesting that whoever has - more than 50% of cobbler's brain along with psychology can be considered as cobbler. Two persons can never have more than 50% of the brain simultaneously.

But the mixed criterion also has some limitations. Whenever we think about criterion, we mostly consider in-general criterion. Now, Gale's solution may fit in the fission problem, but it may not fit elsewhere. Gale suggested that X and Y is the same person, only if more than fifty percent of X's brain resides in Y or more than fifty percent of Y's brain resides in X. If a person's brain gets damaged by sixty percent, then according to Gale we cannot say he is the same person as before. But it is common sense that the person with sixty percent damaged brain is the same person before his brain got damaged. Gale cannot come up with any solution to this, reassuring that his solution is fit only for the fission problem, not for the criterion of personal identity.

I think until and unless two persons at the same time claim to be the same person, there will be no doubt about his or her personal identity neither from the first person's perspective nor from the third person's, even if ninety percent of the brain gets damaged. If a person suffers major brain damage along with memory loss, we do not consider him a different person. In fusion cases, if two persons at the same time claim to be the same person, then to know whose claim is righteous, we need enough brain and memory continuity criterion. This criterion is evidence from a third person's perspective to know whose claim is justified as we can never know first person's qualia. That is why; a person will remain the same person even after brain damage, until there exists another person who will have more than fifty percent of that person's brain. The question about the sameness of a person and the question about personhood is different. If a person's brain is damaged by 60%, the question, that arises whether the person is the same as before, is about the sameness of a person. The answer is, until and unless someone else with more than 50% of brain and memory claims to be that same person, from the third person's perspective, he or she will be the same person.

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