

Background: Machine A and Machine B are located very far apart. They function in roughly the following manner:

- (I) Person X enters Machine A
- (II) Machine A scans the body of Person X creating a representation of it
- (III) Machine A disassembles the body of Person X into unorganised matter
- (IV) Upon successful disassembly, Machine A sends the information collected about the body to Machine B
- (V) Machine B assembles a body that is a particle-for-particle duplicate of the original (now disassembled) body (with the same structural organisation)
- (VI) Something very much like Person X exits Machine B

Question: Is it Person X who exits Machine B? Explain why or why not. Briefly defend your position.

I shall call the person who exited Machine B Person Y. There are arguments for and against saying that Person Y is the same person as Person X. Firstly; I shall argue having already assumed that Person Y is in fact a Person, despite his origins (I shall use male pronouns for simplicity). A distinction can be made between natural and artificial persons, as Hobbes makes in *Leviathan XVI* (1651), saying that a person is natural if his words and thoughts are his own. It is fair to assume Person X is natural. And it is also fair to assume that regardless of whether or not Person Y is Person X, Person Y's thoughts and actions are his own. So Person Y is also a natural person (if not, then he couldn't possibly be Person X).

It is clear that Persons X and Y have identical bodies. Does this make them the same person? If we assume (in agreement with Leibniz, 1714, Section 9) that something ceases to be when it is annihilated, then no. But regardless of this, having the same body is not sufficient to make them the same person, for as Descartes argued, a person is a 'thinking thing' rather than 'a human body' (1996, 18), so sameness of body is irrelevant. Sameness of mind is what matters. So, if Person Y clearly and distinctly believes he has the same mind as Person X, it seems acceptable to say that they are the same person.

So, what matters is that Person Y thinks he is Person X. But does this make it so?

Locke suggests (1690, book 2, chapter 27, section 3) that what matters in sameness of person is 'participation of the same continued life'. It is obvious that there was a gap in continuity, since Person X was completely destroyed before Person Y was created, and there was even a change in location. So this would suggest they might not be the same person.

So far as I can see, memory plays a crucial role (as Locke discusses in Section 9). It seems obvious that, if Person Y believes himself to be Person X, and possesses memory of having been Person X prior to his entering Machine A, then Person Y must be Person X. I shall assume that this is the case, otherwise it would be difficult to hold that Person Y is the same thinking thing as Person X, and so they couldn't be the same person (I am also here assuming that Person Y is a thinking thing at all).

However, an obvious problem is that we often forget things from our past. Unless we are willing to say we are not the same person we were in the past because we lack memory, we cannot say that memory is necessary and sufficient in order that Person Y be Person X.

So, what can replace memory as the key factor in sameness of identity? My answer is nothing. There is nothing that must hold in order that Person X have survived and be the same person as Person Y. Memory is indeed what matters. And this seems

obvious. For, upon further reflection, it seems that common sense suggests that we are NOT the same person we were in the past. I certainly don't feel like I'm the same person I was 5 years ago. Most of us feel like we are the same person we were 5 seconds ago, however. So, what is the cut-off point for sameness of person? Any set time would be arbitrary. Another option might be to suggest that I am mistaken in believing that I am the same 'I' that I was 5 seconds ago. Maybe I'm not. This certainly seems possible. When I think about it, it's obvious that I'm not.

Let's pretend I am Person X. All of me, all of my memory, my essence, my experiences, my being, can be denoted by the identity label 'X'. But now I see a bird fly overhead. 'X' no longer describes all of my experiences. What would describe me now is 'X+b', where b is the experience of having seen a bird fly overhead. And if I suppose also that I have forgotten a certain event from my childhood, I can now be labelled 'X+b-c', where c is the certain event no longer remembered. So it seems obvious and in line with common sense that we change constantly. Our experiences are always changing.

Our identity sways in the breeze of life, encompassing new things in every instant and failing to continue encompassing old things, as the river gains new water from streams and loses some through splashing and evaporation as it makes its journey to the heaven that is the sea, thus ceasing to exist. But, the river does not only cease to exist in its current form upon reaching its destination, every time a drop of water is added or lost, the river has changed its identity by an incredibly small amount. Similarly, I do not only cease to exist upon the ending of all my experiences (the death of the body), but I am constantly ceasing to exist in my current form in every instant. But I am simultaneously becoming someone new, like 'X+b'.

So, this shows that Person Y is not the same as Person X, because Person X an instant later is not even the same as Person X! Person X's identity changes in every instant; new persons constantly come into being and then fail to continue being. Basically, Person X has ceased to be; he is dead. But, this is of no special significance, since death comes in every instant. What it means is that Person X does not equal Person Y.

There is another way of arriving at this conclusion. Small changes usually do not result in a new identity label. Imagine I have a gun. I have owned this gun for 20 years. Not a single part of it is the same; the parts have slowly been replaced. Yet it is the same gun. This case is not like that of a person since a gun does not actually have memories or consciousness at all. But it is a useful example. Suppose that you also have a gun. You decide to skip the 20 year process and simply replace it all in one go with a different gun. We would not say this was the same gun. Most people would think a gradual change does not create a new object, but a big sudden change does. Even though Person X and Person Y have all the same parts, there was still a big sudden change. Person X was dismantled, electronically transmitted elsewhere, and Person Y was constructed. Usually we would not see this as being the same person. But why does it matter that the process was fast rather than slow? Surely it does not. There is no arbitrary speed which serves as the fastest possible speed of change that allows us to say it is still Person X rather than Person Y.

So perhaps we are wrong to consider a person as being the same in any 2 instances, because a minor change has occurred. This is considered by Reid (1785, essay 3, chapter 6), but he dismisses it as being absurd. I would suggest that, far from being absurd, it is the only idea that makes sense. Lewis seems to hint at this idea (1983, 27 and 32) but does not go as far as I have done, saying only that identity-today and identity-yesterday are different, and that we can be partly the same person.

My conclusion also seems to be in line with something Hume suggests. He says that our mind is a 'collection of different perceptions', and that we see a string of

constant perceptions which are closely related, and so we think we see the same thing over time- we 'feign continued existence' (1740, book 1, part 4, section 6) where there really is none.

There is still a problem, however. It is not possible to give people new names every instant just because I have decided that they are new people. This IS absurd. So, in day to day life, we continue to use the same identity label when something changes gradually. This is fine so long as we do not let this trick us into thinking that just because we call it the same thing it actually is the same thing. But, what now remains is a problem of identity labelling.

Should we call the person who emerged from Machine B Person X? You might think not since a big change has occurred. But, from the perspective of Person X, has any change really occurred at all? If we assume Person X was, in one instant, "stopped", and then, in another "started" again, Person X would not actually have experienced being taken apart and rebuilt. The only new experience would be that he is now in a different location. So, only one minor change has actually occurred. Does this mean we can continue to call him Person X?

I think we can. We can, that is, if Person Y thinks he is Person X. Even if, for some reason, Person Y is not Person X; if he thinks he is, then he will act as though he is, and so, for all intents and purposes, he may as well be Person X. I'll give an example.

Imagine now that Steven Seagal was the one who stepped into Machine A, and I am the one who leaves Machine B. We look nothing alike, but this matters not. If, in these circumstances, I remembered being Steven Seagal, and I thought I was Steven Seagal, and if I acted as though I were him, and began to write, produce and star in action movies, and make blues music, and wear Chinese suits, and film my police reality show, and practice Aikido, then I am Steven Seagal! Or, at least, I may as well be Steven Seagal, even if I am- for some reason- not him. Reid (1785, essay 3, chapter 6) says memory does not produce its object. This is obviously true, BUT, if I'm going to act as though it did, then it may as well have done.

Perhaps, in line with Parfit's thinking (1971, 25), we could say I am not the original Steven Seagal specifically, and I am not identical with him, but I am his later self, and he is my earlier self. This seems plausible, and is not inconsistent with my views, since it is possible for me to say that in every instant I become a later self, and in every instant I have a new previous self.

This idea, that we can call it the same thing even though it is ever-so-slightly different, is supported by Hume (1740, book 1, part 4, section 6.). He says identity is a series of different existences, and that, so long as 'X' ceases to be before 'X+b' (to re-use my earlier example) comes to be, we can say they are the same.

To conclude: I confirmed that Y was a natural person (on Hobbes' definition); I suggested that the mind, and not the body, is what is important for personal identity; I considered the importance of memory; I suggested that no person is exactly the same in any two instances (and so a new person, very similar to the previous person, has come into being); but I conceded that, even if this be true, it is impractical to constantly assign people new identities, and so, so long as Person Y thinks he is Person X, and remembers being Person X, we can call him Person X. Even if he isn't really Person X, he may as well be.

So, is it Person X who leaves Machine B? Well, not really. But for all intents and purposes, we can pretend that it is.

Word count: 2000

Bibliography

- Descartes, R., and Cottingham, J., (ed.), 1996, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Hobbes, T., 1651, *Leviathan*, third part located at:
<http://www.oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/hobbes/leviathan-c.html>
[Accessed 25/03/2011]
- Hume, D., 1740, *Treatise on Human Nature*, located at
[http://class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/texts/Hume Treatise/hume treatise1.htm](http://class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/texts/Hume%20Treatise/hume%20treatise1.htm)
[Accessed 01/04/2011]
- Leibniz, G. W., 1714, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, located at
<http://earlymoderntexts.com/pdf/leibdm.pdf> [Accessed 27/03/2011]
- Lewis, D., 1983, *Survival and Identity* in his *Philosophical Papers*, vol. ,
Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Locke, J., 1690, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, located at:
http://www.oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/locke/locke1/Essay_contents.html
[Accessed 29/03/2011]
- Parfit, D., 1971, *Personal Identity*, in: *The Philosophical Review* vol 80 (1), 3-27
- Reid, T., 1785, *Essays On The Intellectual Powers of Man*, essay 3 located at:
<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdf/reidip3.pdf> [Accessed 29/03/2011]