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## The Problem of Personal Identity in Metaphysics

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### Abstract

*Although Western Philosophical tradition ascribes the invention of the problem of identity to John Locke, it has remained one of the fundamental questions within the parameters of enquiry in Metaphysics, Epistemology and Philosophy of Mind. It is one that has remained evergreen right from the Pre-Socratic Epoch to the Contemporary Era. It is in fact one of the perennial problems in philosophy and a celebrated discourse in the enterprise of the Philosophy of Mind. The question of personal identity takes us back to the value content of the first principle of being, which is the principle of identity. This principle states that every being is determined in itself, is one with itself and consistent in itself. Therefore every being is one with itself and divided from others. In this piece, the researcher studies the historical development of the concept of personal identity in the area of Metaphysics. This research stems from Ancient Era to the Contemporary*

*Epoch. At the end of the study, the researcher discovers that the study of personal identity opens us up to two apertures of knowledge, one Epistemological and the other Metaphysical.*

**Key words:** personal, identity, Metaphysics, problem, philosophy

### **Introduction**

Etymologically, the concept person is derived from the Latin *persona*, traceable to the Greek *prosopon*. *Persona* was originally used to denote the mask worn by an actor and then was later applied to the role he played (Okon, 2010). Philosophically, Klubertanz (1953) argues that a person is a supposit that has a rational nature. Onyeocha (2004) opines that it suggests a being with qualities like intelligence, self-awareness, and the ability to communicate. According to Mundi (1985), it is a concept that gives a comprehensive name to man's being, expressing his entire reality in a precise and unequivocal way. Historically, the concept person marks the demarcation between pagan and Christian culture. The reason for this is the inability of the Ancient Era to recognize the absolute value of the individual as such; their concern was for the universal, ideal and abstract; the individual was seen as a momentary phenomenon of the universal species, or a transient instant of the great omnicomprehensive circle of history (Mundi, 1985). Their absolute value depended essentially upon class, rank, wealth and race.

Little by little, the Christian concept of the person succeeded in making inroads and penetrating the pagan culture, it profoundly changed paganism, giving birth to a Medieval and Modern culture which was in turn saturated with Christian values (Mundi, 1985). As regards what constitutes personal identity, philosophers down through the ages have different views, right from the Ancient Era, when the concept was not developed as such, to the Medieval Epoch, the period of its greatest splendour to the Modern and Contemporary Era. In this piece, the burden of the researcher is to go through the history of philosophy so as to sample the views of philosophers on what constitutes personal identity.

### **The problem of personal identity in the ancient epoch**

The Pre-Socratic Philosophers (600 Bc) were at the base of Western philosophy which grew out of religion and mythology (Conford, 1912). It is therefore not surprising that they sought answers to fundamental questions in religious and mythological explanations of reality, man and the cosmos.

They all agreed that there must be an original stuff of which all things are made. But they disagreed what precisely this original stuff and primary elements of all things was. For Thales (600 BC), it was water. For Anaximander (600-548), it was a neutral element infinite, eternal and indeterminate (Omorgbe, 1991). For Anaximenes (528-526 BC), it was air. For Pythagoras (570 BC), the human person comprises the body and the soul (Conford, 1912). For Empedocles (440 BC), all things, including the human person is made up of four everlasting elements: earth, air, fire and water. Their coming together and separation is the cause of the changes we experience in the world (Russell, 1975). The Pre-Socratics were more concerned with the universals, and this affected the development of the concept person during their time.

However, with the emergence of the Sophists, there was a shift in the direction of Western philosophy; man now occupied a worthwhile place in the scheme of things. Protagoras (490-420 BC), Gorgias (late 5th century) and Thrasymachus (late 5th century) are three most outstanding sophists who emerged in Athens sometime during the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Stumpf, 2000). Protagoras, the oldest and most influential Sophist is best known for his teaching that, “Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not”. Judgements are therefore relative. The rise and spread of relativism during this period drew attention to the individual person.

Plato (427-347 BC) argues that the human person is composed of body and soul. The soul is a non-material thing and is capable of existence independent of the body. The soul exists before the body does. Plato gives more function to the soul as seen in the allegory of the cave. For Plato the soul is the real person. The body is a material thing that is capable of independent existence, but not existing after death, first as inert, then as composing. The body is an impediment to attaining true knowledge. It is a prison. The essence of the human person is therefore the soul, and it does not change. This explains the identity and continuity of the human person in spite of changes. At death, the soul leaves the body and goes to another body, or goes back to another world.

Aristotle (384-322 BC) in his *De Anima*, taught that every material being is made up of two elements: matter and form. Not as separate entities as such, but as a complex unity. This explains why his philosophy of living things is referred to as *hylomorphism*, which derives from the Greek words, *hyle* (matter) and *morphe* (form) (Vella, 2008). The form is that which makes a

thing what it is, while matter is the stuff of which it is made. In the human person, the matter is the body and the soul is the form (Allan 1970). For him, Soul and body are aspects of a single substance, standing to one another in the relation of form and matter. Following Plato, he defined the soul as the core essence of a being, but argued against its having a separate existence.

### **The problem of personal identity in the medieval era**

Augustine (354-430 AD), in his *De Trinitate*, was the first to take up a deepened examination of the word *person*. His purpose was to find a word that would be applied distinctly to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, without falling into the error of making them three divinities or dissolving their individuality. In this regard, the concepts *substance* and *essence* were inadequate because they only refer to the things that are common to the three Divine Persons. This distinction he argued belongs to the term *hypostasis* and its Latin correspondent *persona*, which “does not signify a species, but something singular and individual”. Analogically, other than God, this term is also applied to man: “singulis quisque homo una persona est” (every single man is a person). From the foregoing, Mundi (1985) says that the person for Augustine is the single and individual, even though Trape (1973) argues that in Augustine there is still no definition of a person. Be that as it may, even if there is no clear definition of the person in Augustine as in Boethius and Thomas, the concept is there, and this concept includes one of the fundamental elements which no ontological definition of the concept person would omit: the elements of singularity and individuality. The person for Augustine is first of all an individual, unique and an unrepeatable reality (Mundi, 1985).

When St Augustine died in 430 the Germanic tribes from Northern Europe were rapidly subduing the Roman Empire. Fifty years later they were its masters. Italy was then under the rule of the Ostrogoths (East Goths), who had been converted to Arian Christianity. This was the world into which Boethius (480 AD) was born in the year 480 (Armanda, 1968). In his *De Persona et duabus Naturis*, he held that a person is an ‘individual substance of a rational nature’ (*persona est rationalis naturae individual substantia*). This later became the classical definition of person. For him then, person is predicated only of rational beings. Thus for Boethius, rationality and individuality are the criteria that qualifies human beings as persons. Omoregbe (2002) explained this rationality to imply consciousness, thereby dragging Boethius into the thoughts of John Locke. However, how Boethius’

rationality becomes consciousness in Omoregbe is still unsatisfactory and thus contested. In his *De Trinitate*, Boethius tells us that everything owes its being to its form (esse). Man is composed of both soul and body, and is neither soul nor body taken separately. In his *De Hebdomadibus* he teaches that what makes an individual a man is compounded of animality, rationality and individuality. All of these constitute the concrete existing person.

St Thomas Aquinas (1224 AD) was an eminent Philosopher and Theologian. He agreed with Boethius that a person needs to be an individual substance of a rational nature. However, in his *Summa Theologica*, he defines a person as the *subsistens rationale* (a rational subsistent). In his *Summa-Summa Contra Gentiles*, he says that “everything that subsists in rational and intellectual nature is a person”. With the term subsistent, the Aquinas replaces what Boethius had expressed with the three terms: individual, nature and substance. In Aquinas, the person is the individual concrete man, in all his concreteness, uniqueness and unrepeatability, while human nature is only a part of the person (Mundi, 1985).

In Aquinas, the person as the totality of the individual being embraces: matter, the substantial form, the accidental form, and the act of being (*actus essendi*). The *actus essendi* gives a person the property of incommunicability. By virtue of such an act, it becomes complete in itself, ontologically closed. According to Okon (2010), the addition made by Thomas Aquinas to what Boethius had said contain five possible entailments: 1. A person is a substance not accident, 2. A person must have a complete nature, and so that which lacks completeness and remains only a part of nature does not satisfy this definition, 3. It is subsistent by itself, the person exists in himself and for himself, being the ultimate subject possessor of his nature and all his acts and so is the ultimate subject of predication of all its attributes, 4. It is separated from others. 5. It is of a rational nature, this excludes all suppositis that lack rationality.

### **The problem of personal identity in the modern and contemporary periods**

With Rene Descartes (1596-1650 AD), philosophy started a new way, that of gnoseology (Mundi 1985). He defines the person in relation to self-consciousness. In the *Second Meditation*, Descartes, through his methodical doubt, discovers that something resists doubt. That is, the fact that it is he who doubts, and who can be deceived. He thus arrives at *Cogito ergo sum* (I

think therefore I am). To the question, who am I? Descartes answers simply, a “thinking thing”, a thing that essentially has mental experiences, that is, a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, that imagines also, and perceives. According to Njoku (2010), to think in Descartes is to be master of extension; the *cogito* is responsible for all and capable of all. The essence of thinking is to think actively, and this thinking is in the present. The foundation of time and temporality is the fountain of thinking that is properly its origin. All the time “I think”, therefore, “I exist”. The Cartesian man is still a unity.

Based on the above, Mundi (1985) argues that one can concede to Descartes three things: Intellectual knowledge, reason, is an essential requisite of the person, self-consciousness is a distinctive prerogative of man and one can therefore attempt a psychological definition of person. These notwithstanding, by transforming the person from an ontological to a psychological fact, opened the door to a series of either great diminutions or of enormous exaggerations of the concept of person. The major diminutions are those of Hume, Freud, and Watson; meanwhile, the most exasperating exaggerations are those of Fichte, Hegel, and Nietzsche (Mundi, 1985).

The modern history of personal identity begins with Locke. He countered the Cartesian ground for identity- which is thinking, believing that the establishment of identity over time needed a more solid foundation (Njoku, 2002). Against this reasoning, he argues that the identity of a person consists neither in the identity of the immaterial substance, as most dualists are apt to hold, or in the identity of a material substance, as materialists might be expected to hold. John Locke posits that personal identity consists not in the identity of substance, but in the identity of consciousness (Locke, 1964). His view is that the persistence of a person through time consists in the fact that certain actions, thoughts, experiences etc., occurring at different times, are somehow united in memory (Shoemaker, 1998). The nexus between his idea of personal identity and punishment lies at his description of the self as a forensic concept, appropriating actions and their merit (reward or punishment); and so belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of law, and happiness, and misery (Locke, 1964). Consciousness constitutes human identity, hence makes what we call the self. The self owns and imputes to itself past actions, just upon the same ground and the same reason for which it does the present. To be personally conscious for Locke is to be able to recall and take responsibility for one’s actions (Njoku, 2002).

Locke's account of personal identity and the method that he uses to defend it influenced his successors tremendously and remains to this day the starting point of much thinking about the nature of personal identity. It is in fact regarded as the first modern conceptualizations of consciousness (Nimbalkar, 2008). Opponents of the Lockean and Neo-Lockean view tend to fall into two camps. Some following Butler and Reid, hold that personal identity is indefinable, and that nothing informative can be said about what it consist in. Others hold that the identity of a person consists in some sort of physical continuity – perhaps the identity of a living human organism, or the identity of a human brain (Shoemaker, 1998).

Joseph Butler (1692-1752) in his work *On Personal Identity* agrees that consciousness of one' self or one's own existence in any two moments, immediately bring to mind the idea of personal identity. Though consciousness of what is past does not ascertain our personal identity to ourselves, yet to say, that it makes personal identity, or is necessary to our being the same persons, is to say that a person has not existed a single moment, nor done one action, but what he can remember; indeed none but what he reflects upon (Butler, 1941).

As to whether consciousness of past actions or feelings constitutes identity, he says that the relation of consciousness only presupposes identity and cannot constitute it. In other words, I can remember only my own experiences, but it is not my memory of an experience that makes it mine; rather, I remember it only because it is already mine. So while memory can reveal my identity with some past experiencer, it does not make that experience me. What I am remembering, then, insists Butler, are the experiences of a substance, namely, the same substance that constitutes me now (Stanford Encyclopedia, 2011). He believes that the present consciousness, about what we feel and do is necessary to our being the persons we are now, and that present feelings about our past actions and feelings are not necessary to our being the same person who performed those actions, or had those feelings. As such, my being the doer of an action depends on my immediate consciousness of my present actions, and not my immediate consciousness of my past actions.

Thomas Reid (1710-1796) in his *Essays on the Intellectual powers of man* argues that personal Identity supposes an uninterrupted continuous existence.

My personal identity implies the continuous existence of that indivisible thing which I call myself. Whatever this self may be, it is something which thinks and deliberates, and resolves, and acts and suffers. My thoughts, and actions, and feelings, change every moment; they have no continued but a successive existence; the self or I, to which they belong, is permanent, and has the same relation to all succeeding thoughts, actions and feelings which I call mine (Reid, 1941, p.203).

From the foregoing, continued uninterrupted existence is necessarily implied in identity. Personal identity has a characteristic of indivisibility. As such, that which has ceased to exist cannot be the same with that which afterwards begins to exist. Thus for Reid, for one to be responsible for a past and present action, such a person must have existed in the past and continue to exist in the present. Thus, the evidence of what we call the self is remembrance. This remembrance must be accompanied by conviction.

David Hume (1711-1776) in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*, denies the idea of what we call the self, because it cannot be derived from any impression. He says,

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, or heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for anytime, as my sound sleep; so long I am insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist (Hume, p.251).

Hume denies the existence of what we call the self as an underlying substance. He holds that we can identify a complex set of impressions which constitute what we call our self at that particular time. The human mind he says is in a state of flux, and thus, we do not have a basis for believing in the existence of an enduring self

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) in his *A Dialogue on Immortality* argues that all existence, including the human, is a manifestation of an impersonal will to live. For him, personal identity and individuality is erroneous.



My “I” like every other “I” that exists, is a manifestation of the impersonal will to live; and whereas the will to live eternally manifests itself, my “I” like others has only temporal existence (Schopenhauer 2003, p.25).

This leads Schopenhauer to conclude that at death, he would be everything and thus nothing.

Henri Bergson (1859-1941), in his book *Creative mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, argues that we can know a thing either by going round the object or entering the object. It is through the later that we know the self. The later is intuition (Bergson 1992), a method of thinking in duration which reflects continuous flow of reality. Thus, intuition is indispensable for the knowledge of the self. Though Bergson agreed to an enduring self, the self however, for him is not static but as a thing in mobility (Chijioke, 2010).

John McTaggart (1866-1925), in his work *Self as Substance*, argued that if the idea of substance is applied to person, it then follows that there is something underlying our experience and which unifies them. He writes,

The quality of being a self is a simple quality which is known to me because I perceive in strict sense of the word, one substance possessing this quality; this substance is myself. And I believe that every self-conscious being, that is, every self who knows that he is a self directly perceives himself in this matter (McTaggart 1967, p.369).

Thus, it is in substance that the idea of personal identity lies. The self or substance in human beings is a repetitive conscious being that knows and anchors our series of experiences, it equally owns and amplifies them (Chijioke, 2010).

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), in his *Modern Introduction to Philosophy*, argues that the continuity of the body and soul is an illusion. The mental continuity of a person is a continuity of habit and memory. He states, All that constitutes a person is a series of experiences connected by memory and by certain similarities of the sort we call habit (Russell 1973).

He further argues,

We think and feel and act, but there is not, in addition to thought and feeling and action, a bare entity, the mind or

the soul, which does or suffers this occurrence (Russell 1973, p.174).

His argument is that there is no such thing as a soul, or a mind conceived as an entity which does not change. What therefore constitutes the human person is a series of experiences connected by memory. Thus, it is the connection of experiences by memory that constitutes the continuity of a person as well as personal identity (Chijioke, 2010).

Alfred Jules Ayer (1910-1989) in his *The Problem of Knowledge* argues that a person is a combination of two separate entities: a body and a mind (soul). Only the mind is conscious; the physical properties that a person has are the properties of the body. What constitutes personal identity for him is not experience, but upon the identity of the body, because different bodies can share or have the same experience (Ayer, 1974).

If personal identity is made to depend upon the identity of the body, it does follow that two different people cannot occupy the same body, but this does not by itself entail that they can have no experiences in common (Chijioke 2010, p.25).

Derek Parfit (1942-) in his *Reasons and Persons*, discusses the implications of some scientific experiments for the problem of personal identity. What does being the person that you are, from one day to the next consist in? Imagine that a surgeon is going to put your brain into my head; will the resulting person be you or I? Parfit argues for a reductive account of personal identity.

At time 1, there is a person. At a later time 2, there is a person. These people seem to be the same person. Indeed, these people share memories and personality traits, but there are no further facts in the world that makes them the same person (Parfit, 1942).

What matters in the end for Parfit is not personal identity but mental continuity and connectedness.

### Conclusion

A cursory glance at the historical development of philosophy reveals that philosophers, who have made attempts to account for personal identity through time and change, fall into roughly three categories. There are those

who explain personal identity in mentalistic terms. Here, personal identity is considered to be a function of the continuity of thoughts, beliefs and feelings. There are those who explain personal identity in materialistic terms, that is, the continuity of our bodies. They argue that although the body you have now is larger than the one you had when you were younger, the *Spatio-temporal* continuity provides the basis for your identity through time. Finally, some philosophers argue that personal identity is just an illusion. They argue that we do not persist through time and through the changes that occur in our body. Be that as it may, the study of personal identity opens us up to two apertures of knowledge, one Epistemological in the sense that it leads us to a search (how to tell what it is), and the other Metaphysical in the sense that it leads to the discovery of an underlying principle of being.

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