

# EMPIRICIST THEORIES OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

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Intro Metaphysics

## 1. The Aristotelian theory

What makes a substance the same substance as an earlier substance is that its matter is the same, or obtained from the matter of the former substance by gradual replacement, while continuing to possess the essential properties which constitute its form. (Swinburne, p. 370)

**Substances** individual things, such as Ted Sider, or a certain oak tree

**Properties** features that can be had in common by multiple substances

**Essential properties of a substance** those properties the substance has, and couldn't possibly exist without

**Form of a substance** all of its essential properties

**Matter of a substance** the stuff that's in that form

## 2. The body theory

If we apply Aristotle's general account of the identity of substances to persons, it follows that for a person to be the same person as an earlier person, he has to have the same matter (or matter obtained from that earlier person by gradual replacement) organized into the form of a person. The essential properties which make the form of a person would include, for Aristotle, not merely shape and physiological properties, but a kind of way of behaving and a capacity for a mental life of thought and feeling. (Swinburne, p. 370)

**Body theory** One person is identical to a later person if and only if the later person has the same matter as the earlier person, or matter obtained from the earlier person's matter by gradual replacement, organized throughout into the form of a person

### 3. The brain-swap objection

Suppose Madonna and my brains are swapped; call the person with Ted's body afterwards "Tedonna".

*Brain-swap objection to the body theory*

1. If the body theory is true, then Ted is identical to Tedonna
2. Ted is not identical to Tedonna
3. Therefore, the body theory is false

### 4. The brain theory

**Brain theory** One person is identical to a later person if and only if the later person's brain has the same matter as the earlier person's brain, or matter obtained from the earlier person's brain by gradual replacement, organized throughout into the form of a brain

### 5. The prince and the cobbler

...should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince's past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler, as soon deserted by his own soul, everyone sees he would be the same person with the prince, accountable only for the prince's actions. (John Locke, quoted in Shoemaker, p. 339)

(We may consider swapping of psychological patterns instead of souls.)

Prince-Body: the person in the prince's body after the swap (has the cobbler's psychology)

Cobbler-Body: the person in the cobbler's body after the swap (has the prince's psychology)

*Prince and cobbler objection to the body and brain theories*

1. If either the brain theory or the body theory is true, then the prince is not identical to Cobbler-Body

2. Cobbler-Body is responsible for the prince's crimes
3. If Cobbler-Body is responsible for the prince's crimes then the prince is identical to Cobbler-Body
4. Therefore, both the brain-theory and the body-theory are false

## 6. Locke's memory theory

**Locke's theory** One person is identical to a later person if and only if the later person remembers something the earlier person did

## 7. The brave officer

A boy is flogged at school, takes a standard from an enemy in his first campaign, is later made a general. When he takes the standard he remembers the flogging; when he is made general he remembers taking the standard but doesn't remember the flogging.

*Brave officer argument*

1. If Locke's theory is true, the boy = the standard-taker, and the standard-taker = the general, but the boy  $\neq$  the general
2. Identity is transitive: for any  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ , if  $x = y$  and  $y = z$ , then  $x = z$
3. Therefore, Locke's theory is false

**Modified Lockean theory** A person is identical to a later person if and only if they are connected by a series of persons, each of whom can remember something done by the previous

## 8. Amnesia

Shoemaker's suggestions: potential memories, and psychological connections other than memory.

**Psychological theory:** A person is identical to a later person if and only if they are connected by a series of persons, each of whom is psychologically connected to the previous—i.e., has memories of something done by the previous, or has a personality and character traits that are similar to and caused by those of the previous

## 9. The duplication argument

What if *two* people, Charles and Robert, *both* have memories of the deeds of some past person, Guy Fawkes?

The problem also confronts the brain theory. Consider division of the brain:

The human brain has two very similar hemispheres — a left and a right hemisphere. The left hemisphere plays a major role in the control of limbs of and processing of sensory information from the right side of the body (and from the right sides of the two eyes); and the right hemisphere plays a major role in the control of limbs of and processing of sensory information from the left side of the body (and from the left sides of the two eyes). The left hemisphere plays a major role in the control of speech. Although the hemispheres have different roles in the adult, they interact with each other; and if parts of a hemisphere are removed, at any rate early in life, the roles of those parts are often taken over by parts of the other hemisphere... It might be possible one day to remove a whole hemisphere, without killing the person. (Swinburne, pp. 374)

A brain theorist should count losing one hemisphere as “gradual” replacement. But then, consider the double transplant example:

My body is dying of cancer, but my brain is fine. Doctors divide my brain and place each hemisphere into a separate clone of my body, since such transplants are usually unsuccessful. But in this case each succeeds.

### *Duplication argument (first half)*

1. If either the brain-theory or the psychological theory is true, then the person before the operation is identical with two distinct persons
2. One person cannot be identical with two distinct persons.

3. Therefore, neither the brain theory nor the psychological theory is true

Possible response: say that “branching” makes a person stop existing:

**Nonbranching psychological theory:** A person is identical to a later person if and only if i) they are connected by a series of persons, each of whom is psychologically connected to the previous—i.e., has memories of something done by the previous, or has a personality and character traits that are similar to and caused by those of the previous, and ii) no other person at the later time is thus connected to the earlier person

**Nonbranching brain theory** One person is identical to a later person if and only if i) the later person’s brain has the same matter as the earlier person’s brain, or matter obtained from the earlier person’s brain by gradual replacement, organized throughout into the form of a brain, and ii) no other person’s brain at the later time is thus connected to the earlier person’s brain

But how can personal identity be “extrinsic”?

Suppose  $P_1$ ’s left hemisphere is transplanted into some skull and the transplant takes. Then, according to the theory, whether the resulting person is  $P_1$ , i.e., whether  $P_1$  survives, will depend on whether the other transplant takes place... So whether I survive an operation will depend on what happens in a body entirely different from the body which will be mine, if I do survive. But how can who I am depend on what happens to you? (Swinburne, pp. 374–5)

And, as Derek Parfit puts it, “How could a double success be a failure?”

**Case 1** Ted has his brain split and put into two clones of Ted's body: Lefty and Righty. Both transplants succeed.

**Case 2** like Case 1, except only the transplant to Righty succeeds; the Lefty body rejects its hemisphere of Ted's brain and dies immediately

*Duplication argument (second half)*

1. If either the nonbranching brain theory or the nonbranching psychological theory is true, Ted survives the operation in Case 2 but not in Case 1
2. If Ted survives the operation in Case 2 but not in Case 1, then Case 1 is much worse for Ted than Case 2
3. Case 1 isn't much worse than Case 2 for Ted
4. Therefore, both the nonbranching brain theory and the nonbranching psychological theory are false

Possible responses:

- Reject 2 (Parfit). Sometimes going out of existence isn't so bad.
- Reject 3 (Sosa). We learn that a double success is bad once we learn that it causes the person to stop existing.
- Accept the conclusion (Swinburne):

...personal identity is distinct from, although evidenced by, similarity of memory and continuity of brain. (p. 377).