



Exploring Philosophy - Audio

Personal identity

Winifred

In this section the course author, Nigel Warburton, is talking to A C Grayling, Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London.

Nigel Warburton

Anthony Grayling, I wonder if you could say a little bit about personal identity as a philosophical problem.

Anthony Grayling

The question of personal identity poses problems for philosophers because it's such a central notion in ethics, in the philosophy and in thinking about the individual and society. You want to know what makes a person the same person therefore the same locus of responsibilities and rights over time. So in what does the identity of a person consist

Nigel Warburton

And what are the main candidates?

Anthony Grayling

Well there are a variety of candidates. The debate started with Locke. When Locke wrote his great essay concerning human understanding he sent copies round to all his colleagues and said have I left anything out. And William Molyneux of Dublin wrote back and said yes, you've left out the great question what makes a person the same person over time. Prior to that people just assumed that we had a substantial soul created by a Deity and it was that which got you know more depressed and more stained with sin as time went by. But by the end of the Seventeenth Century things weren't so clear any longer and so Molyneux posed the challenge to Locke.

Nigel Warburton

And the challenge was can you explain what allows us to talk about us being the same person despite change over time.

Anthony Grayling

That's right. It's easy enough to see what keeps a lump of rock the same lump of rock over time. And you can give a pretty good account of why you think that the acorn and the mighty oak that grew from it can be the same oak tree over time. Locke himself said it's the same organisation as matter. But what is it that underwrites the dramatic changes between a little baby and a child, a teenager, a young adult an elderly person that makes that person the same. How is it that the old man is the same person as the little baby when first born?

Nigel Warburton

Well one obvious answer is to say we are like acorns turning into oak trees and then declining and dying. Why aren't we just like an organism in the natural world like any other one?

Anthony Grayling

Locke noticed that things can happen to people like for example a stroke or being hit by lightning or something falling on your head, which would stop you being anything like the person you seemed to be beforehand. And therefore seemed just insufficient to say that bodily continuity as with an oak tree is what keeps personhood the same over time because the concept of a person is not the concept of a physical thing. The concept of a person is a forensic concept that is a concept important in morality and in law, something you can praise and blame. So it's the sameness of personhood not the sameness of body that really counted for Locke.

Nigel Warburton

So Locke actually distinguished between being the same man or same human being as it were, which is like being the same oak tree and being the same person

Anthony Grayling

Exactly right. Yes.

Nigel Warburton

And his main criterion for that was psychological continuity in the form of memory.

Anthony Grayling

Indeed. In fact he coined the term which has now become commonplace in English, the term "consciousness", to say that if we are conscious to ourselves of being the same person at a later time as we were at an earlier time, then we are continuous with that person. And of course it is memory essentially, which is the connecting link between different phases of a person. Hence if you lose your memory you are no longer the same person as you were before that event.

Nigel Warburton

Well who am I? You know if I lose my memory does that mean I cease to exist? Surely there is some sense in which I still am the same person even though I've lost most of my memory.

Anthony Grayling

Well we tend to think from the third person point of view that somebody who has lost their memory looks like the person that they were before. What in fact we've identified Locke would say is the same body but what's been lost because of the discontinuity in memory is the continuity of person hood. For example supposing you borrowed a fiver from that person before this catastrophic loss of memory and afterwards the person no longer remembered having lent you the fiver. It would raise an interesting question as to whether you are under an obligation to pay that person the fiver back. This is not the same person even though it's the same human being, human body. So what exactly are we to think about the moral continuity of obligation, debt, the rest.

Nigel Warburton

For Locke, if I capture a former concentration camp guard, who has completely forgotten because he is an old man now, what he did in wartime, it would be wrong to hold him responsible, morally responsible for what he'd done?

Anthony Grayling

That is a consequence of Locke's view.

Nigel Warburton

That's interesting because there are some present day issues that arise from pharmaceutical researchers developing new drugs which allow combat soldiers to forget what they've just done. So from a moral point of view according to Locke a soldier who had taken one of those drugs, wouldn't be responsible for the actions he performed, or she performed, in the battlefield although he or she would be responsible for having taken the drug.

Anthony Grayling

Yes it's interesting that because that point can be urged as an objection to the Lockean theory. And if you had done something horrendous and just bashed yourself on the head with a base ball bat in order to no longer be accountable for it that would raise a raft of other questions. So that indeed would be one of the reasons why later philosophers have called Locke's view into question.

Nigel Warburton

And Thomas Reid for instance suggested a case where somebody could remember as an old man what they'd done as a youth and when as a youth they could remember what they had

done as a child, but the old man couldn't remember the action performed by the child. And that seemed to go against this whole idea that the self is constituted primarily by memory because we still want to say there are overlapping memories there that is enough to be the same self.

Anthony Grayling

Yes Reid was relying on the fact that identity, which is a one one relationship, should be transitive. So if the young man remembers being the child and the old man remembers being the young man then the old man should be identical with the child. But on Locke's view, which is that the sameness of person essentially rests on continuity of memory, that old man is not the same person as the young child.

Nigel Warburton

Now Locke did believe that there was such a thing as the self and it was basically constituted by our memories. Hume, however, seemed to be saying that when he looked within himself there was no self to be found.

Anthony Grayling

Now Hume was trying to be a very rigorous empiricist and he invited us to conduct the following empirical investigation, which is to quote unquote "look within" and to see if in addition to all the current sensations, thoughts, images, feelings, pangs of anger and the rest, we could find something over and above them which owned them, which persisted through them and which was our self. And he said you couldn't. And so he came up with this view which is known as the "bundle theory" of the self in which at any moment you just are a ... bundle of sensations and feelings.

Nigel Warburton

Now jumping ahead a few hundred years, Derek Parfitt has been an immensely influential figure in the area of personal identity. It seems to me that he's drawing on both Locke and Hume in what he has to say about the nature of the self.

Anthony Grayling

Yes indeed. Parfitt's view is a descendant of a combination of Locke and Hume and the results for Parfitt is that the idea of a person and the idea of identity so the two components of personal identity, are not either of them very important. But really what we have here is a case not so much of continuity even but of connectedness between psychological states at different times. That what we think of as the person at a later time is not at all the same person in any sense of that expression as at an earlier time. But is something connected by a causal change as it might be or by a set of events to an earlier psychological phase.

Nigel Warburton

On my reading he is saying that personal identity doesn't really matter and for Parfit that has huge implications as to how he thinks about his future death. He is saying that when he is thinking about his own death all he is talking about is the ceasing of certain sorts of psychological states which are connected in some ways with the ones that he is having now

Anthony Grayling

Yes –

Nigel Warburton

It's not as if it's a death of his self

Anthony Grayling

Yes, the idea that it's me who will be undergoing these things in the future is to be thinking in the wrong way about whatever it is in the future that will cease to be. That I think is the implication of what he is saying.

Nigel Warburton

So just to summarise this. The question of personal identity isn't simply an abstract philosophical question. It really does have moral implications, particularly as it crops up in Locke because not just responsibility for our actions in the present world but for Locke the possibility of being judged after death is really at stake there.

Anthony Grayling

Yes it was certainly a state for Locke to be thinking of a posthumous situation where you might be held to account for things that you'd done, praised or blamed for them. But even if you didn't take that kind of view and one thing that is very important about Parfit's view is this that a person as a forensic entity, that is the thing where responsibilities, rights, choice and the whole panoply of moral concepts apply. What we want to be able to say of such a thing is that it can have projects, it can have plans, it can intend, it can carry out his intentions, it can work towards goals and aims. It can be held accountable for what it does and therefore be praised or blamed for them. In other words it is a node in a very rich network of concepts which fall without it. If there were no such thing as persons, if, for example we were all automata; we had no free will, no choice and the rest then the whole apparatus of moral thinking collapses.