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Bodily continuity and personal identity

Note 1972. This was a reply to criticisms made by Robert C. Coburn (*Analysis*, 20.5, 1960) of an argument which I used in 'Personal identity and individuation' to try to show that bodily continuity was a necessary condition of personal identity, and more particularly that similarity of memory claims and personal characteristics could not be a sufficient condition of it. There is some more about the 'reduplication' argument discussed here, in 'Are persons bodies?', on pp. 77 *seq* of this book.

The argument which Coburn criticises runs like this. Suppose a person A to undergo a sudden change, and to acquire a character exactly like that of some person known to have lived in the past, B. Suppose him further to make sincere memory claims which entirely fit the life of B. We might think these conditions sufficient for us to identify A (as he now is) with B. But they are not. For another contemporary person, C, might undergo an exactly similar change at the same time as A, and if the conditions were sufficient to say that A=B, they would be sufficient to say that C=B as well. But it cannot be the case both that A=B and C=B, for, were it so, it would follow that A=C, which is absurd. One can avoid this absurdity by abandoning one or both of the assertions A=B and C=B. But it would be vacuous to assert one of these and abandon the other, since there is nothing to choose between them; hence the rational course is to abandon both. Therefore, I argued, it would be just as vacuous to make the identification with B even if only one contemporary person were involved.

Coburn claims that this argument can be applied just as well to another case in which it gives unacceptable results. He supposes the case of a man George who suddenly disappears; 'a moment later an individual begins to exist who is in all discernible respects exactly similar to George (say, George*)'.[1] Coburn argues that to this case, too, my argument would apply, with the result that it would be vacuous to identify George* with George. But this, he argues, is unacceptable: such an identification would certainly not be vacuous, since much would depend on it (concerning e.g. punishment for George's crimes). Moreover it is an identification that we should justifiably accept. Hence my argument is called into doubt.

[1] *Analysis* 20.5, p. 118.

First, a point about 'vacuity'. In saying that an identification of A with B in the imagined circumstances was 'vacuous', I did not mean that no consequences would follow from it. If the identification were taken seriously, consequences of the kind Coburn mentions could as well follow in my sort of case as in his. My use of the term 'vacuous' concerned not the consequences, but the grounds, of such an identification, my argument being meant to show that there would be in principle for such a case no grounds to justify a judgement of identity as against a judgement of exact similarity. I agree that the term 'vacuous' is misleading, in that it suggests that there would be no difference at all between the two judgements, and this, in terms of consequences, is false.

My argument can be put in another way to incorporate this point. Where there is a difference in the consequences, in this sense, of two judgements, there should all the more be a difference in their grounds, for it is unreasonable that there should be no more grounds for applying one of a pair of judgements to a situation rather than the other, and yet one judgement carry consequences not carried by the other. On the thesis that similarity of character and of memory claims is a sufficient condition of personal identity, there would be no difference in the grounds of two judgements, that of identity and that of exact similarity, one of which does carry consequences not carried by the other. Hence that thesis is to be rejected. (What is meant by 'exact similarity' here is '*mere* exact similarity', an assertion of which would entail the denial of identity.)

More important than this point about vacuity is the conclusion which Coburn states, or rather implies, that we should in fact in a case such as he describes identify George* with George, and be justified in so doing. If this conclusion is correct, and it is also correct that my reduplication argument would apply as well to this case, my argument must be defective. Now Coburn does not make entirely clear the circumstances of his imagined case. He does not say whether George* appears in the same place as that from which George disappeared; and while he says that George* appears 'a moment later', he does not say whether he regards the shortness of the interval as essential to his example or not. If Coburn allows distant places and long intervals of time for the appearance of George*, his case would in fact approximate to my original one, with physical resemblance added to the resemblances of character and memory claims. If, on the other hand, a short interval of time and reappearance in the same place are essential to Coburn's example, it is worth asking why this should be so.

I shall argue that if Coburn's example is to provide a case of identity, it must be restricted in this way; but that when it is restricted in this way, it is not a counter-example to my argument. The principle of my argument is, very roughly put, that identity is a one–one relation, and that no principle can be a criterion of identity for things of type *T* if it relies only on what is logically a one–many or many–many relation between things of type *T*. What is wrong with the supposed criterion of identity for persons which relies only on memory claims is just that '... being disposed to make sincere memory claims which exactly fit the life of ...' is not a one–one, but a many–one, relation, and hence cannot possibly be adequate in logic to constitute a criterion of identity. (There are well-known difficulties about speaking of identity as a relation at all. The point being made here can be expressed more rigorously in terms of the sense and reference of uniquely referring expressions, but I hope it is clear enough in this rough, and shorter, form.)

This principle states a necessary condition of anything's serving as a criterion of identity. It clearly does not state a sufficient condition; still less does it state a sufficient condition of anything's being, for a given type of thing *T*, a philosophically satisfactory criterion of identity for *T*s. In particular (and this was the basis of the later part of my original argument), no principle *P* will be a philosophically satisfactory criterion of identity for *T*s if the only thing that saves *P* from admitting many–one relations among *T*s is a quite arbitrary provision.

Returning now to Coburn's example, it can be seen that if it is taken as quite unrestricted, the criterion of identity suggested by it will not pass the test just stated, any more than the bare memory and character criteria do; for the relation '... being in all respects similar to, and appearing somewhere at some time after the disappearance of, the individual...' is many–one, and could not suffice to do what a criterion of identity is required to do, viz. enable us to identify uniquely the thing that is identical with the thing in question. However, if the principle is restricted in certain ways, this difficulty can be avoided. If, for instance, it is modified to: '... being in all respects similar to, and appearing as the first subsequent occupant of the place vacated by the disappearance of, the individual ...', it will pass the test, so long at least as two, slightly different, conditions are satisfied about the application of the expression 'the place vacated by ...': first, that it should be so restricted that it will not be possible for two persons simultaneously to occupy that place, and, second, that it should be sufficiently determinate not to leave it in doubt which of two or more places, so restricted, is the place in question.

It is perhaps this latter condition, among others, that introduces the consideration, not mentioned in the criteria as so far stated, but mentioned in Coburn's example, of the length of the lapse of time between disappearance and appearance. One reason at least why one might be moved to introduce a very brief lapse of time into Coburn's example is this: that if the lapse of time is very short, it is very much clearer what 'the same place' will be. Granted a longer time, in which various changes can take place, it may become less clear and determinate what 'the same place' will be. For instance, if George had been in bed in his bedroom when he disappeared, and the bed, before George* appears, is moved into another room or another house, where must George* appear in order to appear in the place vacated by George? Difficulties of this kind could be multiplied indefinitely. One motive for the introduction of a brief lapse of time is, then, perhaps this: that it makes the application of 'same place' more determinate than it might otherwise be.

However, there is perhaps another motive for thinking in terms of a brief lapse of time: that it is only this that makes a criterion of identity in terms of 'same place' plausible *at all*. For if the appearance of George* happens some substantial time after the disappearance of George, why should his appearance in precisely the place vacated by George be privileged in giving an answer to the identity question? Here we have a dilemma: on the one hand some such restriction is needed, to make the principle implied in the example into a criterion of identity at all; on the other hand, it seems equally to be in these circumstances quite arbitrary.

One reason for the latter is that in thinking about the imagined case we are in fact using a model drawn from the real world and our normal identification of persons: a model in which the disappeared George, though 'immaterial', in some sense goes on existing, and in particular can move from one place to another. This model contains an illusion, no doubt; but to see that there is an illusion should lead one, not to stick unthinkingly to a criterion of identity to which identity of place is essential, but to conclude that the application of criteria of personal identity to these imagined cases of disappearance is a far less certain and indisputable buisiness than may at first sight appear.

Now Coburn himself cannot consistently have in mind a restricted principle as the criterion of identity presupposed in his example, since he says that in his example reduplication would be possible. If the criterion presupposed in his example were restricted in the ways I have been discussing, no reduplication would be possible, since it could not

be the case that two persons could both be the first subsequent occupants of the place (in the required sense) vacated by the disappearance of George.

It seems, then, that Coburn has in mind as suggested by his example a principle unrestricted in space and time. If so, I do not see how it can satisfy the logical requirements of being a criterion of identity. If, on the other hand, the principle were restricted in space and time, it would be a possible criterion of identity, in the sense at least that it satisfied the logical requirements of such a criterion; but in that case, the possibility of reduplication could not exist, and his case would not be a counter-example to my argument, which was directed against supposed criteria of identity which did not satisfy the requirements. If, again, the principle were restricted in space but not in time, it might still satisfy the logical requirements (though there would be systematic doubts about its application), but it would scarcely seem a plausible or philosophically satisfactory sort of criterion. Whether, granted this point, the fully restricted criterion would be plausible or satisfactory, is a question I shall not pursue here, though I think the answer is in fact 'no'.

It may be objected to this argument that I have set too high the standard for a principle's serving as a criterion of identity, by requiring that it guard against the logical possibility of reduplication such as I have discussed. No criterion can guard against this, it may be said; and this can be seen from the fact that even a criterion of identity in terms of spatio-temporal continuity, on which I lay the weight for personal identity, is itself not immune to this possibility. It is possible to imagine a man splitting, amoeba-like, into two simulacra of himself. If this happened, it must of course follow from my original argument that it would not be reasonable to say that either of the resultant men was identical with the original one: they could not both be, because they are not identical with each other, and it would not be reasonable to choose one rather than the other to be identical with the original. Hence it would seem that by my requirements, not even spatio-temporal continuity would serve as a criterion of identity: hence the requirements are too high.[2]

I do not think, however, that this case upsets the principle of my

[2] This sort of case has been discussed in his contribution to this topic by C. B. Martin (*Analysis* 18.4, March 1958). Martin's own criticism, however, seems merely to confuse identity with the quite different concept of 'having the same life-history as', where this is defined to suit the amoeba-like case. To say that (putatively) two amoebae are identical is to say that *pro tanto* I have only one amoeba; to say that they share the same life-history is not. Cf. G. C. Nerlich, *Analysis* 18.6, June 1958, on this point.

argument. There is a vital difference between this sort of reduplication, with the criterion of spatio-temporal continuity, and the other sorts of case. This emerges when one considers what it is to apply the criterion of spatio-temporal continuity. To apply this criterion – for instance, in trying to answer the question whether a certain billiard ball now in my hand is the billiard ball that was at a certain position at the start of the game – is to engage in a certain sort of historical enquiry. The identity-question contains two expressions each of which picks out an object of a certain type under a description containing, in each case, a different time-reference; to answer the question is to chart an historical course which starts from the situation given by one of the descriptions, in order to see whether this course does or does not lead to the situation given by the other. This procedure, ideally carried out, will give the entire history in question; and in particular, if there were any reduplication of the kind under discussion, *it would inevitably reveal it*. This consideration puts the spatio-temporal continuity criterion into a different situation from the others discussed; for in this case, but evidently not in others, a thorough application of the criterion would itself reveal the existence of the reduplication situation, and so enable us to answer (negatively) the original identity question. To enable us to answer such questions is the point of a criterion of identity. Thus, in this case, but not in the others, the logical possibility of reduplication fails to impugn the status of the criterion of identity.

I think that these considerations perhaps suffice for us to say that in a case of fission, such as that of an amoeba, the resultant items are not, in the strict sense, spatio-temporally continuous with the original. The justification for saying this would be that the normal application of the concept of continuity is interfered with by the fact of fission, a fact which would itself be discovered by the verification procedure tied to the application of the concept. There would be a motive for saying this, moreover, in that we might want to insist that spatio-temporal continuity, in the strict sense, was transitive. But for the present issue, nothing immediately turns on our decision on this point.

It may be said that for most sorts of objects to which spatio-temporal continuity applies, we do not in fact pursue our identity enquiries in this thorough-going historical way. This is true, but nothing to the point; because, for most sorts of objects, we have the strongest empirical reasons for disbelieving in reduplication. Where we have not such reasons – for instance with amoebae – one would indeed (in the unlikely event of one's wanting to answer an identity

question) have to watch out for reduplication, by constant observation or otherwise.

I conclude, then, that this sort of case, because of its special nature, does not tell against my general position; which is that in order to serve as a criterion of identity, a principle must provide what I have called a one–one relation and not a one–many relation. Unless there is some such requirement, I cannot see how one is to preserve and explain the evident truth that the concepts of identity and of exact similarity are different concepts.