

Rachels & Rachels, The problem of personal identity

Notes and study questions

I'll refer to Rachels & Rachels—who are a father and son—as R&R.

Section 5.1

R&R set up **the problem of personal identity** as a question about whether we survive death. That's one aspect of it, but, more generally, it's about determining the basis on which we are the same person over time. This is what Cave was referring to when he wrote "The questions of what a person *is*, and therefore what a person can survive, form a lively area of philosophical debate known as personal identity theory" (p. 10).

Now, of course, most of the time we don't need a theory to inform us that the baby who was born to your parents on your birthday and the person who is reading this right now are the same person. But the purpose of a theory of personal identity is to help us understand the basis for this continued identity and, in so doing, tell us something about what it means to be a person.

What is the machine the scientists invent in the "Thought Experiment" sub-section? Does the machine work?

What do the scientists want to do to you? For your trouble, what are they offering you? What would you do in this situation?

What do R&R think that most people would decide in this situation?

Would it matter if the "you" that survives in another world after your death (if that happens) is a duplicate or a copy of the you who is reading this right now?

Section 5.2

What, according to R&R, are the two aspects of the problem of personal identity?

What is the bundle theory? (Hint: R&R begin discussing this theory at the very bottom of p. 53 and continue in the first full paragraph on p. 54. The definition is on p. 54 in the sentence that begins "One hypothesis is that.")

What is the soul theory?

R&R don't say that the soul or the ego or self has to be something separate from the brain (or from a person's body, in general), but that would be one interpretation of this theory. If we removed all of your memories, thoughts, habits, emotions and other mental states, do you think that a core self would remain? That's another way of thinking about the soul theory.

How do R&R explain the soul theory in the last paragraph on p. 54? (The one that begins, "The Bundle Theory may be hard to accept.")

Did David Hume agree with the bundle theory or the soul theory?

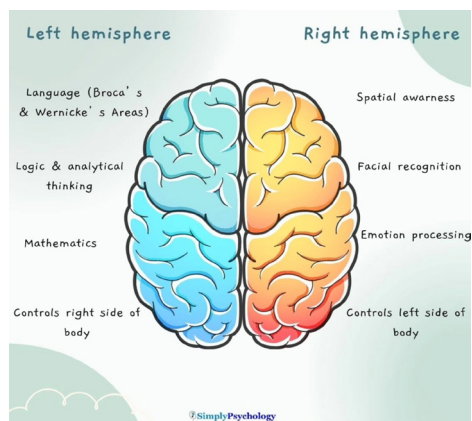
What point are R&R making with the analogy about a car at the top of p. 55? Besides all of its parts and components, is there a separate entity that is *the* car? What do R&R think that the answer to this question is?

If it is "silly" to think that the car is a separate thing that exists in addition to all of the parts of a car, then is it also silly to think that there is a self (or a soul) that is a separate thing that exists in addition to all of our mental states?

Split Brains sub-section

Who is Roger Sperry and what did he investigate?

The hemispheres of the brain are the left and right sides. This image represents the view if you were looking down at the top of the brain:



Normally, why don't signals from each brain hemisphere interfere with each other?

What is the corpus callosum? What sorts of things happen to a person whose corpus callosum has been severed?

Given the kinds of events described at the top of p. 56, what is R&R's assessment of individuals who have a severed corpus callosum? What does Sperry think?

What is Derek Parfit's split brain thought experiment?

Does Parfit's split brain thought experiment support or undermine the soul theory?

At the bottom of p. 56, R&R write, "*One person* sounds wrong." What are they talking about here and why does *one person* sound wrong?

Then, at the top of p. 57, they write, "But if we say that there are two selves, we invite a barrage of embarrassing questions." What are these questions, and do R&R think that they would be easy or difficult for the soul theory to answer?

Does Parfit's split brain thought experiment support or undermine the bundle theory?

Does Parfit think that each of us has a soul or a self?

Section 5.3

The previous section was about what makes a person a person. In the remainder of this chapter, R&R are going to investigate what it is that makes someone the same person at different times (or how it can be that someone is the same person at different times).

Based on what they said in section 5.2, R&R don't think that the soul theory is true. But what do they say about the soul theory in the first paragraph of this section (5.3)?

If the bundle theory is true, then, according to R&R, "what fundamental problem remains"?

Numerical and Qualitative Identity sub-section

According to what R&R say in the first paragraph on p. 58, what makes someone qualitatively identical (or, at least, almost identical) at two different times? What makes someone *not* qualitatively identical at two different times? Is John Smith today qualitatively identical to the roommate that (one of) R&R had in college?

Is John Smith today numerically identical to the roommate that (one of) R&R had in college?

"When philosophers ask whether person A is the 'same person' as person B, they are almost always asking whether A and B are" ... qualitatively or numerically the same?

Section 5.4

What is the essential feature of the same-body theory?

When reading this and the other theories discussed in the remainder of this chapter, keep in mind that X and Y are individuals—X being one who exists at an earlier time than Y. And so, each theory provides the criteria that make X and Y the same person. If it's not a good theory, then we can think of ways that X and Y are the same person even though, according to the theory, they are not.

According to R&R, in everyday life, is the same-body theory good enough for establishing that someone you knew in 2015 is the same person whom you saw in 2025?

According to what R&R say in the first full paragraph on p. 59, what does the same-body theory “seem to rule out”?

The Prince and the Cobbler sub-section

Did John Locke agree or disagree with the same-body theory?

How does the prince and the cobbler story go? Did Locke think that the prince and the cobbler story showed that the same-body theory was right or that it was wrong? Why?

The Ship of Theseus and the Human Body sub-section

What, according to Plutarch, happened to the Ship of Theseus?

Do you think that, if over a period of years (or decades), every part of a ship was replaced, it would remain the *same* ship? That is, would it be numerically identical to the version of the ship before any parts were replaced? What do R&R think?

What is cell regeneration? What does it mean for the same-body theory?

Does cell regeneration also happen to neurons (that is, the cells that make up the brain)?

What is the Same-Brain Theory?

What do R&R say about this theory immediately after stating it? (Do they think that it’s promising or not?)

In the last paragraph of this section (on pp. 60 & 61), R&R discuss a potential problem for the same-brain theory. What is this problem?

This isn’t the best objection to the same-brain theory since (1) once blood flow to the brain stops, it’s not the “same” brain for very long. And (2) the theory could be easily avoid this problem if we just change the last part to something like “if and only if they have the same functioning

brain.” If there is a fundamental problem with the same-brain theory, it might be better explored with a split brain thought experiment or the duplicator thought experiment (from pp. 52 - 53).

Section 5.5

What is the memory theory? If we use this theory, then how do we explain what happened in the prince and the cobbler story?

The passage by Thomas Reid (on pp. 61 – 62) describes a person at three points in his life:

(1) when he was a boy, (2) when he was a young soldier, and (3) when he was made a general.

When he was a young soldier, he remembered being a boy (and being beaten for robbing an orchard), and when he was made a general, he remembered being a young soldier in his first military campaign. But when he’s a general, he doesn’t remember robbing the orchard as a boy.

If we use the memory theory, then how do we explain Reid’s example? (In other words, for 1, 2, and 3, who is the same person and who is not?)

Why, according to R&R, isn’t the memory theory correct?

How do R&R modify the memory theory in last paragraph on p. 62? (The paragraph that begins “However, the Memory Theory.”) How does this new theory handle Reid’s example?

According to this new theory, are the boy and the general the same person?

According to the memory-links theory, are (a) you and (b) the person occupying your body and sleeping in your bed the same person? Why or why not?

Memory and Responsibility sub-section

In the first sentence of this sub-section, R&R say that the memory theory explains what? And it fits with what? What does the prince and the cobbler story illustrate about responsibility?

In the argument on p. 63, (1) and (2) are premises and (3) is the first conclusion. Then, once (3) has been established, it functions as a premise so that we can get (4), which is the second conclusion.

What do R&R say about amnesia and responsibility? Do you agree?

What is R&R's example about a murderer in the first paragraph on p. 64? Does this person remember his crime? Is he, according to R&R, still responsible?

So, we can have both of these:

(a) from the John Smith case: no memory of an event, and no responsibility for it

(b) from the murderer case: memory of an event, and no responsibility for it

And then there is also this:

(c) from the prince and the cobbler case: memories and responsibilities going together

The takeaway is, first, that memory and responsibility don't have to go together, which means that premise 1 in the argument is false. Moreover, personal identity and responsibility also don't always go together, which means that premise 2 is false.

R&R go through this assessment of the argument kind of quickly, and they don't offer too much defense of their own positions. So, you might disagree with them (in part or in whole). One thing to clarify is that we can make a distinction between (i) morally responsible, (ii) blameworthy, and (iii) causally responsible. In (a) and (b), John Smith and the murderer are both causally responsible for their crimes. (That is, they caused the events to happen.) Whether they are morally responsible or blameworthy is a separate issue from being causally responsible. But since they both intentionally committed their crimes, whether they are morally responsible or blameworthy is an open question. Maybe they are, maybe they aren't, but there's more to say than what R&R cover in these two paragraphs. ("Forgiven" is another concept that might be relevant here.)

In the last paragraph of this section, R&R say that moral responsibility goes with qualitative identity or with numerical identity?

Is the Memory Theory Trivial? sub-section

What problem with memory do R&R discuss in the first two sentences of this section?

How many people in Ulric Neisser's study remembered, 2.5 years later, what they had been doing when they heard that the *Challenger* exploded?

Why are inaccurate (or completely wrong) memories a problem for the memory-links theory?

Consider Thomas Reid's example again. Reid describes a person at three points in his life: (1) when he was a boy, (2) when he was a young soldier, and (3) when he was made a general.

Simplifying a little bit, the general doesn't remember being a boy, but he remembers being a young soldier. And when he was a young soldier, he remembered being a boy. So, on the face of it, the boy and the general are the same person according to the memory-links theory.

What if, however, all of the memories that the general has about when he was a young soldier are false memories? That is, he doesn't have even one specific memory of an event that actually happened. The memory-links theory requires a chain of *accurate memories*, and so if the general doesn't have any accurate memories from when he was a young man (or earlier), then there's no linkage between the boy and the general. So, just as we found with the first memory theory (p. 61), the boy and the general aren't the same person.

Now, we might imagine that the general, like everyone else, is going to have some accurate memories from earlier in his life and some inaccurate ones. But often, there aren't good ways of determining which memories are accurate and which ones aren't. Nonetheless, we might, at this point want to modify the memory-links theory like this:

X, who lived at an earlier time, is the same person (numerically) as Y, who lives at a later time, if and only if a chain of *accurate* memories links X and Y.

But this encounters the problem that R&R explain in the last 13 lines of this section. Saying that *the general has an accurate memory of stealing the flag as a young soldier* just means that *the general was the person who stole the flag as a young soldier*. But the purpose of the memory-

links theory is to inform us that two people (X and Y or the young soldier and the general) are the same person. But a theory that tells us that X and Y are the same person because X and Y are the same person is useless as a theory.