

# Lecture 05: Central Themes

s.butterfill@warwick.ac.uk

## 1. Personal Identity: The Question

[Olson's formulation] If a person exists at one time and something exists at another time, under what possible circumstances is it the case that the person is the thing?

Key distinction: numerical vs qualitative identity.

Numerical 'Identity is utterly simple and unproblematic. Everything is identical to itself; nothing is ever identical to anything else except itself. There is never any problem about what makes something identical to itself; nothing can ever fail to be. And there is never any problem about what makes two things identical; two things never can be identical' (Lewis 1986, pp. 192–3).

'Few concepts have been the source of more misunderstanding than identity over time. The Persistence Question is often confused with other questions or stated in a tendentious way.' (Olson 2019)

## 2. Psychological Continuity

*The Psychological Criterion of Personal Identity:*  $X$  at  $t_1$  is the same person as  $Y$  at  $t_2$  if and only if  $X$  is uniquely psychologically continuous with

$Y$ , where psychological continuity consists in overlapping chains of strong psychological connectedness, itself consisting in significant numbers of direct psychological connections like memories, intentions, beliefs/goals/desires, and similarity of character (Parfit 1984, 207)

Two lines of objection to Psychological Continuity:

- You were once an embryo.
- You can be psychologically continuous with more than one individual [not covered in this lecture].

### 2.1. You Were Once An Embryo

*Person Essentialism* is the view that being a person is an essential property. (Contrast nonessential properties, like being the wearer of the most fly shoes.)

Without person essentialism, the Psychological Criterion would not be a criterion of identity after all.

Inconsistent Triad:

1. Sam was an embryo; unless she recovers, Sam will be in a PVS.
2. Person essentialism is true.
3. Necessarily, a person existing at one time is a person existing at another time if and

only if the first mentioned person can, at the first time, remember an experience the second mentioned person has at the second time, or vice versa.

## 3. Biological Continuity

*The Biological Criterion of Personal Identity:*

Necessarily, a person existing at one time is a thing existing at another time if and only if the first mentioned person's biological organism is continuous with the second thing's biological organism.

Inconsistent Triad:

1. If Sam and Ayesha were to swap brains for a day, Sam would later be morally responsible for actions involving Ayesha-body.
2. You are only responsible for the actions of things numerically identical with you.
3. The Biological Continuity View of personal identity is true.

## References

- Lewis, D. (1986). *On the plurality of worlds*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Olson, E. T. (2019). Personal Identity. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 ed.). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.