Personal Identity and Immortality

I. Some Background

(A) The Self

The questions “Who am I?” “What am I?” and “Will I survive my bodily death?” are fundamental questions in human existence. Not surprisingly, however, they don’t admit of obvious or simple answers. As you will recall, Descartes argued that he was essentially a thinking thing or a mind (“sum res cogitans”) and that the mind could exist apart from the body. (That is, it is conceptually possible for the mind to exist apart from the body, and, therefore, presumably we have some philosophical wiggle-room for an afterlife.) As I have said, Descartes’s view led him to an ontology that many have considered unattractive. But there also be something odd in the idea that we can look inside ourselves and determine what or who we are. Consider the flaky saying, “I need (to go to California) to find myself.” What could possibly count as the thing to be found? What is one looking for? David Hume offered a brilliant critique of the idea that one kind find one’s self through introspection. “When I turn my reflection on myself, I never can perceive this self without some one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive any thing but the perceptions. It is the composition of these, therefore, which forms the self.” (Treatise, Appendix) In other words, we have no direct knowledge of or experience of the self; we only have knowledge of particular sensations, memories, and so on. We must suppose that there is something that underlies or bundles together these sensations, and that is the self.

(B) Personal Identity

When philosophers talk about “personal identity,” they are asking how it is that two distinct persons can be the same. That is, let a and b stand for persons. When is it the case that a = b? Suppose a = you (aged 16) and b = you (now). In what sense can a = b? Certainly you have changed over time; your body is different and you have acquired new memories and beliefs and (probably) forgotten things about your life that you knew when you were 16. What makes you the same person? Here are four possible views. (Of course, there are more.)

(1) Dualism: you are the same person over time because you have (or you are) the same soul. That is, person a at t₁ is the identical to person b at t₂ if and only if a has (or is) the same soul at t₁ that b has at t₂.

(2) The Memory view: you are the same person over time if and only if you have access to same store of memories (and history of beliefs, desires, and so on). That is, person a at t₁ is the identical to person b at t₂ if and only if b has the same memories as a (or b’s memories include those of a). (This view is pushed by John Locke in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book II, Chapter 27, and is developed in Perry’s Dialogue.)

(3) Animalism: you are the same person over time if and only if there is a continuity of your organism. (Think of the identity of any animal or any organism. There is a problem of identity over time for that thing that needs to be solved. Do you want to say that the acorn and the old oak tree are the same because they have the same soul?)
(4) The Brain View: you are the same person over time if and only if your brain remains identical over time. (It will, of course, undergo change as all physical objects do, and it can be physically altered to account for new mental states and so on. But the central idea is that the brain is special for and indeed uniquely constitutive of your identity.)

With a dualist view, you can hold on to personal immortality; with animalism and the brain view, you can’t really (they are versions of materialism); the Lockean view makes no claims about the status of the thing that has consciousness and memory and so could go either way. (In fact, one of the early critiques of Locke by Bishop Butler (and implicit in what Hume said) is that the continuity of memory and consciousness presupposes identity and does not establish it.)

II. John Perry’s Dialogue

(A) First Night

In the “First Night” Weirob distinguishes between two ways in which we talk about identity:

1. numerical identity: two things are at different times the very same thing
2. qualitative identity: two things at different times or at the same time share all properties (except for spatio-temporal location)

For example, the Introduction to Philosophy textbook that I have today is numerically identical to the one I had in class yesterday; but my textbook is qualitatively identical to yours (at least, they were when they were newly purchased).

The point is that what really counts in the question of immortality is that I exist as the same person (numerically identical) after my bodily death. And, indeed, in the case of personal identity, the point is that I am numerically identical over time.

Miller tries to present a dualist view to Weirob, which doesn’t go over too well. His first argument seems to be something like this:

1. I see that a has the same body at \( t_1 \) as at \( t_2 \).
2. A body is always associated with the same soul.
3. Therefore, I know that a has the same soul at \( t_1 \) as at \( t_2 \).
4. Therefore, I know that a is the same person at \( t_1 \) as at \( t_2 \).

As Weirbob points out, premise (2) is really iffy, for when have we ever had direct knowledge of inner soul of someone else? (This is what she is getting at with the box of chocolates analogy.)

Towards the end of the first night, Weirob seems to make the following argument:

1. If dualism is true, then we know nothing about identities of persons in everyday life, because we can have no knowledge of the identity of souls.
2. But we do know about the identities of persons in everyday life.
(3) Therefore, dualism is false.

(Cf. p. 402a: Weirob: “You are the one who says personal identity consists in sameness of this immaterial, unobservable, invisible, untouchable soul. I merely point out that if it did consist in that, you would have no idea who I am. Sameness of body would not necessarily mean sameness of person. Sameness of psychological characteristics would not necessarily mean sameness of person. I am saying that if you do know who I am then you are wrong that personal identity consists in sameness of immaterial soul.”)

(B) Second Night

In the second night, Miller tries a new tack, arguing for a “stage theory” of personal identity. This is really just another form of Locke’s memory theory. Miller: “A person is just a whole composed of such stretches as parts, not some substance that underlies them, as I thought yesterday, and not the body in which they occur, as you seem to think.” (p. 406a) The stages are linked by memory.

There are problems related to this view, too. What if someone were hypnotized and all my memories were suggested to and “implanted” in the other person? Would he now be identical to me? – No, memories have to arise in the right way; that is, they have to be caused in the correct way. (Whatever that means.)

The second night concludes with a discussion of whether the memory theory is sufficient to give us immortality. Is it the same thing that has all my memories after I die and go to heaven or something different? If different, then it must be the case that God created something new for these things to inhere in. But God could just as well create two new things. Would both be identical to me? That’s absurd. But even if God creates only one new thing, isn’t it merely similar to me and not identical to me?

(C) Third Night

Forget immortality. Let’s just talk about personal identity. Here Cohen tries to argue for the Brain theory – that is, that identity is determined by the identity of the brain over time (which can be seen as a physicalist version of the memory theory). Consider the case in which a brain transplant operation is performed. This was originally presented in a classic work by Sydney Shoemaker, something like this: There are two men, Brown and Johnson. Brown’s brain is put in Johnson’s body, creating Brownson. The question: Who is Brownson? Brown or Johnson?

But if personal identity is the identity of the brain, the physical object, then we might have the following troubling case. Imagine a perfect duplicate brain can be created. What happens when we put the original brain into one (new) body and the duplicate into another (new) body. I awake from the operation and how do I know if I have (or am) the original or the duplicate brain?