

Identity eliminated

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In his (1986) David Lewis famously wrote:

Identity is utterly simple and unproblematic. Every thing is identical to itself; nothing is ever identical to anything else except itself. ... We *do* state plenty of genuine problems in terms of identity. But we

needn't state them so. Therefore they are not problems about identity. Is it ever so that an F is identical to a G? ... That is, ... is it ever so that an F is a G? The identity drops out. Thus it is a good question whether a river is something you can bathe in twice; or whether a restaurant is something that can continue to exist through a simultaneous change in ownership and location and name ... or whether there could be a time traveller who meets his younger self; or whether there was ever a genuine nation that included both Austria and Hungary. All of these questions could be stated in terms of identity – harmlessly, unless that way of stating the questions confused us about where to seek for answers. (192–93)

I was immediately convinced (and remain so). But also puzzled. Lewis's insight I take to be twofold: (a) if a question can be phrased without using the language of identity it is not a question about identity (the question 'Am I fat?' is not question about identity even though it is equivalent to the question 'Am I identical to someone fat?'¹), (b) traditional philosophical problems stated using the language of identity can one and all be stated in the language without identity.

Now claim (a) is unpuzzling, since it is just a stipulation (although a sensible one) about what to *call* 'a question about identity'. But claim (b) is different. It says that the traditional problem of personal identity over time, for example, can be stated without mention of identity. But *how*?

Traditionally this problem is phrased by asking: what are the criteria of diachronic personal identity? Or: what makes a person P1 at a time t_1 identical with a person P2 at a time t_2 ? Or: what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for a person P1 at a time t_1 to be the same as a person P2 at a time t_2 ? There are various alternative identity-involving formulations and some may be preferable to others.² But how, in accordance with

¹ Again, the question 'Is there a (male) bigamist in Brighton?', i.e. 'Is there a man in Brighton with two wives?', can be rephrased as 'Is one and the same man in Brighton married to different women?', but this does not make it a question about identity. The same holds of the structurally analogous questions: 'Does someone exist at two times?' and 'Does something inhabit two possible worlds?'. (Of course, these questions refer to identity/difference of wife, time and world, as Lewis's question about the restaurant refers to identity/difference of time, location, owner and name, but that is irrelevant.)

² In his encyclopaedia article Eric Olson (2002) offers the alternatives: 'Under what possible circumstances is a person existing at one time identical with (or the same person as) a person existing at another time?' and 'Under what possible circumstances is a person who exists at one time identical with something that exists at another time (whether or not it is a person then)?' and argues that the second is preferable.

Lewis's claim, is it possible to formulate the problem of diachronic personal identity without mentioning identity *at all*?³

At first sight the passage quoted from Lewis is no help. What he does, in the examples he gives, is to illustrate how *specific* questions about *necessary* conditions for identity over time can be reformulated without the language of identity. Thus, following his lead one sees that the question: 'Is bodily continuity a necessary condition of personal identity?' can be reformulated as 'Is a person something that can continue to exist through a change of body?' That is, 'Is it a necessary condition of a thing's being a person that it has the same body at any two times it exists?' A question about a necessary condition of personal identity over time thus becomes a question about a necessary condition of *personhood*.

But the passage from Lewis does not tell us how to reformulate questions about specific sufficient conditions⁴ of personal identity over time without mentioning identity, or how to reformulate the general question 'What are the necessary and sufficient conditions of personal identity?' without doing so.

Of course, if like Lewis himself one is a four-dimensionalist, there is no problem. Questions about the necessary and sufficient conditions of personal identity over time go over into questions about the necessary and sufficient conditions for the obtaining of the unity relation for persons – that relation, which is *not* identity, that holds between person stages just in case there is a person of which they are stages. And since we can say,

³ It better be possible, as Salmon shows (see his (1986) and elsewhere). For any x , it is false that $x = x$ in virtue of the satisfaction of some criterion of identity, since it is just a fact of logic that $x = x$ (if x exists). So if $x = y$ this cannot be so in virtue of the satisfaction of some criterion of identity either, otherwise something would be true of x which was not true of y . Of course, this is just another application of the Evans-Salmon form of argument against indeterminate identity *de re*. But it is none the worse for that. The conclusion to draw, however, is not, as Salmon thinks, that the traditional problem of person identity is bogus. The proper conclusion is just that since the traditional problem is a genuine one, it is not a problem about identity, and so must be expressible without mention of identity. (Now indeterminate identity has been mentioned another point is worth making. If a question is not a question about identity then its answer cannot be indeterminate just because identity is indeterminate (even if it is). (It is not because *identity* is indeterminate that it is indeterminate whether I am fat.) So if questions traditionally phrased using the language of identity are not questions about identity their answers cannot be indeterminate, if they are, just because identity is indeterminate. In short, if Lewis is right, we know in advance that if it is indeterminate whether the rebuilt church is the original, the repaired ship the Ship of Theseus, and Brownson Brown the explanation must be something other than the indeterminacy of identity.)

⁴ 'Is it ever so that an F is a G?' just means 'Is some F G?' 'Some F is G' tells us that it is not a necessary condition of a thing's being (identical with) an F that it fails to be G. But it says nothing about sufficient conditions for being (identical with) an F.

as I have just done, what it is for something to be the unity relation for persons without mentioning identity, the question ‘What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for the obtaining of the unity relation for persons?’ is not a question about identity.

But how is one to formulate the problem of personal identity over time without mention of identity if one is not a four-dimensionalist, or wishes to remain neutral?⁵ Or is Lewis’s claim that all the traditional so-called problems about identity are wrongly so-called one that only a four-dimensionalist should accept?

At this point some will have recourse to relative identity (I call an equivalence relation a relative identity relation when it does not entail Leibnizian identity, i.e. indiscernibility). Thus Michael Jubien: ‘...“the problem of personal identity” is a genuine philosophical problem with a profoundly misleading name. The essence of the problem is to find an analysis of the special *same person as* relation. But ... this is a question about *personhood*, not a question about identity.’ (1996: 354). Why? Because ‘[s]ometimes ... when one entity x bears this special relation to a “later” entity y , x may be identical with y . But in other cases the identity may fail’ (1996: 354). Similarly, R. M. Chisholm held that there was nothing informative to be said about personal identity over time because personal identity was *not* a relative identity relation (unlike ship identity), or, as he put it, was *not* identity in the ‘strict and philosophical sense’.⁶

But there is no need to resort to relative identity. The problem of personal identity over time can be formulated as follows, without mention of identity:

- (1) What conditions C satisfy the following schema: (P) If x is a person then if x exists at t and t^* , $Cxtt^*$?

A solution to the problem, i.e. an account of personal identity will then take the form:

- (2) All and only the following conditions satisfy schema (P): {LIST}.

To see that this is an adequate rephrasing of the problem one need only observe that a condition is sufficient just in case nothing else is necessary. So a *complete* list of necessary conditions together with the fact that the list *is* complete determines all the sufficient conditions. But a quaternary

⁵ One might try to appeal to something less than full-blown four-dimensionalism, for example, by appealing to an ontology of events. But then the question becomes how to formulate the problem consistently with the view that events are mere adjectives of things.

⁶ For defence of this interpretation of Chisholm see my (1993).

relation R, satisfied by ordered quadruples $\langle x, t, y, t' \rangle$ is *sufficient* for the identity of person x at t with person y at t' just in case there is no such relation R', not entailed by R, which is a necessary condition of personal identity over time (where to say that R' is a necessary condition of personal identity over time is just to say, as we have seen, that if x is a person and x exists at t and t^* then $R'xtxt^*$).

Question (1) thus expresses, without mention of identity, everything that could possibly be wanted in enquiring after the conditions of personal identity over time. And it emerges that, by illustrating how necessary conditions of identity for things of a kind can always be reformulated as necessary conditions of kind membership, Lewis did, after all, provide in the passage quoted all the information needed to recognize the correctness of his claim.

Different views on the nature of personal identity will emerge in different proposals about the membership of {LIST}.

Thus the proponent of what Parfit calls the Simple View will say that its only members are ' x exists at t and t^* ', conditions trivially entailed by that (' x exists at t and t^* or snow is white') and conditions constraining the instantaneous states of persons at times.⁷ Proponents of the Complex View will dissent.

Those who think causal connectedness is a necessary condition of personal identity over time will include something like: 'some of x 's states at t are causally linked to some of x 's states at t^* '.

A 'no rival candidate' theorist will include something like: 'there is no distinct person y such that $Rxyt^*$ and $Rxtxt^*$ ' – where R may be, for example, the relation *x as it is at t is psychologically continuous with y as it is at t^** .

Someone who thinks that every person has what we might call an 'omnitemporal core' (the temporal analogue of an individual essence), will want to include the condition: 'for some F , x is *the* F at t and x is *the* F at t^* '.

And so on.

⁷ Others who will agree, but for quite different reasons, include Trenton Merricks. Merricks (1998) maintains that there are no criteria of identity over time for anything. A mountain cannot survive liquefaction, but that is because there are no liquid mountains. However, a mountain *may* be all gold at one moment and all ice the next, since it is possible for a mountain to be gold and it is possible for a mountain to be ice and it is not an essential property of any gold mountain that it be gold (though it may be an essential property of it that it was *originally* made of gold). Merricks's position is thus that kind membership imposes no constraints on a thing's history apart from those deriving from the constraints imposed on its instantaneous states. But half the paper is devoted to irrelevant discussion of the unanalysability of identity and existence at a time. This is a good example of how unnecessary mention of identity muddies the waters.

Of course, questions of synchronic identity for persons are subsumed under question (1). Conditions listed under (2) will include ones of the form: ‘if $t = t^*$ then Rxt ’.

Questions of identity across time for things of other kinds can be formulated similarly, and questions of identity across spaces and worlds for persons or things of other kinds can likewise be put in this form.

Thus the question of transworld identity (or of the conditions of biworldliness, as I prefer to think of it)⁸ may similarly be formulated without mention of identity. The question, asked of individuals generally, is:

- (1') What conditions C satisfy the following schema: (I) If x exists in world w and x exists in world w^* then $Cxww^*$?

Its answer will take the form:

- (2') All and only the following conditions satisfy schema (I): {LIST}.

Of course, what question (1') expresses will depend on the interpretation of ‘possible world’ and ‘exists in’. But on no interpretation is (1') a question about identity. (On Lewis’s own interpretation of ‘possible world’ as ‘maximal summation of pairwise spatio-temporally related objects’ and ‘exists in’ as ‘is part of’, his claim is that there are no biworlders, i.e. nothing leads a double life, so the membership of {LIST} includes some condition nothing satisfies.)

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⁸ Taking the hint Lewis gives in the title of Chapter 4 of *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986). See n. 1.