Personal Identity, Numerical and Qualitative

Oliver Black, London

In the analytic tradition, 'the problem of personal identity' is usually taken to mean a question of numerical identity over time: what makes X at one time the same person as Y at another? But the title also fits a set of questions - at least as interesting - which concern what may be called qualitative identity. A person's qualitative identity comprises his defining properties (DPs): these are properties that he must mention in a full answer to the question 'Who am I?', taken in a special sense which can be discerned by contrast with the ordinary sense of the third-person 'Who is X?' If you and I are watching a ceremony and I, pointing to one of the participants, ask 'Who is she?', my purpose is likely to be to find out that person's role in the ceremony: the question and the appropriate answer are relative to my purpose, which is set by the context. In the sense relevant to DPs, 'Who am I?' is not thus relative to context and purpose: rather, in answering the question I identify properties of mine that determine my purposes. There is, however, no simple asymmetry between the first-person and the third-person questions; the third-person question can, although it rarely does, take this sense, and conversely the first-person question can be relative to purpose and context, as for example where roles in a game are being assigned and one of the players is unsure of his role. Nevertheless the special sense is more prominent in the first-person case.

DPs 'determine' purposes in a sense that covers relations of justification, constitution and causation. Suppose it is one of my DPs that I am a devout Catholic: then my being one justifies me in having - in the sense of being a practical reason for me to have - the purpose of going regularly to church; it is a practical reason for me to fulfil that purpose; and, assuming that I am practically rational, it is a theoretical reason to believe that I have and fulfil that purpose. Also, my having the purpose of going regularly to church is likely to be part of what it is - although it is not a necessary condition - for me to be a devout Catholic, and my being one may cause me to form the purpose of visiting Rome. To say that DPs determine purposes does not imply that a person must first have DPs before he can have any purposes: I may acquire a DP, and may even do so deliberately, in the course of pursuing an existing purpose. If I am set on making money, I may decide that the best method is not only to become a stockbroker but also to adopt that job as part of my qualitative identity.

The justification of purposes is one role played by DPs in practical reasoning. More generally, if F is a DP of mine, that I have F is likely often to be an important premiss, explicit or implicit, in my practical deliberation. Importance can be explicated in various ways, depending on the model adopted of practical reasoning. If the structure of a person's practical reasons is conceived by analogy with standard models in epistemology, it might be viewed as a hierarchy of reasons for action that rest on a set of foundational reasons - the person's ultimate ends - or as a web of reasons. On the former view, the importance of a premiss will be the greater, the nearer it is to the foundation; on the latter view, the nearer it is to the centre of the web.

A wide variety of properties can be DPs. People are often defined by their job, or even their former job (retired civil servant), or by their occupation in a broader sense (housewife, writer). Someone may be defined by nationality, by a connection with an institution (alumnus of Yale), or by relations - notably ones involving commitments or close attachments - to individuals (father of so-and-so). Holding a certain belief - in particular a religious or political belief - can be a DP, as can having a certain trait of character. A DP can be a physical property - being very short, for example, or being beautiful.

The distinction between a person's DPs and those of his properties that do not define him cross-cuts certain other distinctions, in particular those between necessary and contingent properties and between individuating and non-individuating properties. As to the necessary and the contingent, it may be a DP of mine that I am an artist, but I might not have been one; conversely, it may be a necessary property of mine that I have a certain genetic code, but this is unlikely to appear in my answer to the question 'Who am I?' As to individuating and non-individuating properties, I am not the only artist; conversely, even if I have the property of being the only man wearing a black hat in Piccadilly at noon on 1 July 2002, this is unlikely to be one of my DPs. It is a confusion of immaturity to try to base one's qualitative identity on uniqueness and thus on a contrast between oneself and everyone else.

The concepts of qualitative identity and of DPs, and the special sense of the question 'Who am I?', can be defined in terms of each other, but they appear to form a primitive triad: an explanation in terms of the determination of purposes, practical reason and the contrast with necessary and individuating properties, or in terms of other concepts such as commitment, is not readily sharpened into a definition or even into a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. In particular, importance in practical reasoning seems, at any rate on a narrow conception of practical reasoning, not to be necessary for a property to be a DP. If, for example, the DP in question is susceptibility to a mood, its connection with action will not primarily be rational in any narrow sense. My gloominess may affect my actions - and the connection between mood and action may be rational in the broad sense that my behaviour is appropriate to someone who is gloomy - but in deciding what to do I shall not normally reason from the premiss that I am gloomy (although I may do so if, for example, I am trying to find ways of changing my character). Also, in the case of some DPs - such as that of being a contemplative hermit - there is no connection with action in any narrow sense. Nor is importance in practical reasoning sufficient by itself for a property to be a DP. For example, the premiss that I desire to stay alive is likely to be near the foundation or centre of my structure of practical reasons, but the property of desiring to stay alive will not normally be a DP of mine. My answer to the question 'Who am I?' is likely to presuppose, rather than mention, this property.

Even if these concepts cannot be defined in other terms, distinctions can be drawn within them, in particular between a person's actual identity, the identity he strives to have (projected identity) and the identity he believes he ought to have (normative identity). There is a parallel distinction between DPs. These qualitative identities

interact: for example, actual identity constrains both the formation and the achievement of projected identity. Someone with the actual identity of a Chinese peasant farmer is unlikely ever to have heard of the British Parliament, and hence will be unable to strive to have the identity of a member of the House of Commons. Even if he does have the relevant concepts and thus is able to form that projected identity, he is unlikely to be able to achieve it. Conversely, projected identity affects actual identity: if I constantly strive for an identity beyond my reach, I may acquire the actual identity of a loser. Projected identity may also affect actual identity through interpretation. Suppose that hitherto I have spent my time going to fashionable parties. Disgusted with the triviality of my life, I resolve to become a novelist and, like Proust, to incorporate my experiences of high society in my novels. I accordingly reinterpret my life to date not as a waste of time but as a necessary period for the collection of material. The reinterpretation may involve self-deception - I might pretend to myself that I had only ever gone to the parties with the intention of collecting material - but need not do so. It might be suggested that such cases of interpretation connect projected identity not with actual identity but with beliefs about it; but, although it is true that there is a distinction between who I am and who I think I am, this distinction becomes blurred where the ascription of an identity involves interpretation.

The concept of qualitative identity raises many issues: for example, whether it is a matter of degree; whether everybody has such an identity (see below); whether some people have more than one; the senses in which qualitative identities and DPs cohere; whether we can choose our qualitative identities; whether they are socially determined; the distinction, just mentioned, between who I am and who I think I am; the extent to which we should reflect on our qualitative identities; the nature of change of such identity; and - the topic of the rest of this paper - the relation between qualitative and numerical identity of persons.

For X to be the same person as Y it is neither necessary nor sufficient that X and Y have the same qualitative identity. That it is unnecessary is shown, for all but very broad conceptions of qualitative identity, by the case of the young boy and the old man who are the same person but differ in their actual, projected and normative identities. It also follows from the proposition that a person may lack a qualitative identity. This proposition is plausible for projected and normative identity; it seems that I could live from day to day without ever considering who I want or ought to be. But it also seems possible, if more difficult, to live without an actual identity, or at most with only a low degree of actual identity: such a condition might be described as one of radical irony or detachment. Consider a woman who says of her work as a philosopher, 'It's fun, and I have to earn a living, but I'd have been just as happy working in the City'; of her husband, 'I get on with him, but who knows how long we'll stay together?'; of her attendance at synagogue, 'It's just a habit I picked up in childhood'; and so on. It might be said that, by default, she has the identity of an ironist; but that would be inaccurate if, say, her irony came in phases between periods of commitment, or if she had certain commitments and attachments which were nevertheless too weak to ground an identity. In support of some weaker version of the claim of necessity it might be argued that some radical changes of qualitative identity break the thread of numerical identity: Parfit's example of the nineteenth-century Russian, who as a young man regards his socialist ideals as essential to him but abandons them in middle age, might be described in these terms (Parfit 1984, 327-328). But it seems that

such a description would either be hyperbolical or presuppose a revisionist concept of personhood.

That sameness of qualitative identity is not sufficient for numerical identity follows from the fact that not only are DPs distinct from individuating properties, as noted earlier, but two people can share all the DPs that constitute their qualitative identity. You and I may both be English aristocratic hypochondriacs who work in banking (actual identity), strive to become rich enough to retire as country squires (projected identity) and believe that we ought to have had military careers (normative identity).

Qualitative and numerical identity are nevertheless connected in significant ways. Standard accounts of the latter analyse it in terms of continuity, bodily or psychological, but it is sometimes sustained in part by continuity of qualitative identity: part of what makes the old man the same person as the young boy may be a gradual and overlapping change of DPs. 'Sustained in part' might here be glossed in terms of a condition more complex than a necessary or sufficient condition - possibly, in some cases, an 'inus' condition in Mackie's sense: an insufficient but non-redundant part of an unnecessary but sufficient condition (Mackie 1974, 62). The relations between continuity of qualitative identity and the other forms of continuity differ from case to case; where the DPs include psychological properties, the same factors - say, a gradual change of character - may partly constitute both psychological continuity and continuity of qualitative identity.

Conversely, numerical identity at least sometimes partly sustains qualitative identity. Certain DPs must of their nature be possessed for an extended period: the property of having a given character trait is an example; another is any DP involving a commitment. I cannot be kind-hearted, or committed to a religious life, merely for an instant. It seems in fact that no property possessed for an instant is fit to be a DP. There was an instant at which Armstrong stepped on to the moon, but the relevant DP here is not the fleeting property of stepping on to the moon but the enduring one of being the first person to have stepped on to it. Possession of a DP therefore presupposes numerical identity through the relevant minimum period.

There is a further connection between qualitative and numerical identity. The existence of a person who can be reidentified over time entails a degree of integration of his properties, specifically those of having certain mental states: as integration declines, the person subsides into madness and at a certain point ceases to exist. It is plausible to hold that such integration in its higher degrees may partly consist of coherence among DPs and qualitative identities.

References

Mackie, J. 1974 *The Cement of the Universe*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Parfit, D. 1984 *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.