

Who Are You?

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Introduction

Who are you? I once came across this question when I was reading *Sophie's World* written by Jostein Gaarder. The first mysterious letter received by Sophie only had these three words. For sure she was Sophie, but what does that mean? Could she have been the same person if she had a different name, a different age or a different hair cut? The answer is most likely yes, but why? Throughout our lives, from birth to death, we change in so many ways. However, why are we so sure that we are still the same person as the 5-year-old child from years ago?

To tackle this riddle, I suppose that we need to think about what makes me “me”. What is the essence of me that even if any other things of me have changed, I can still call myself “I”? This is related to the concept of personal identity. Philosophers have been pondering this problem for centuries but we still cannot reach any consensus. In other words, there is no right answer. Nonetheless, it is crucial to think through this question as it affects greatly how we see the world and ourselves. Thus, I will explain some of the possible answers about personal identity and the objections to these ideas.

Same Body, Same Person?

If I ask you to point at yourself, you would probably point at your physical body. The body theory is one of the answers given by people for the question. As a human being, a biological organism, it is obvious that if my body stops functioning completely, I will die. The theory suggests that we are the same persons as long as we have the very same living material body over time. This idea is intuitive. At first glance, it makes a lot of sense. Let's say you want to know whether I am the same person as the one you saw last week. You could have followed me around for the whole week and see that I am still having the same body. Then, applying the body theory, I am still me.

Problems of the Body Theory

However, there are certainly problems with this theory. What if I have a liver transplant? What if I wake up with a different body like Franz Kafka wrote in *The Metamorphosis*? In fact, the components of my body change so much that all my cells might have been replaced when comparing to the time I was born. Nevertheless, I am still convinced that I am myself despite that my body is no longer the same. Maybe the key is my DNA? Maybe it is the physics and chemistry that makes me me? If I have a clone which has the exact same genetic component as I do, I would not consider my clone as the same person as I am. I desire to know what makes me uniquely me, but this theory seems to tell me that I am not one and only. Thus, the body theory does not satisfy me.

Aristotle suggests that there are four causes to explain a change or the production of things, namely formal cause, material cause, efficient cause

and final cause. (Lindberg 24) If we explain this in terms of Aristotle's idea of four causes, our physical body would be our material cause. However, the material cause is insufficient to explain our identity, as we also need to identify forms and functions. According to Swinburne, for Aristotle, the essential properties of a person are not the shape but it should include "a kind of way of behaving and a capacity for a mental life of thought and feeling". (319) In another word, the physical body could not have been the essential property.

Am I the Continuity of My Thoughts and Memories?

Philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) suggested that we are our continuity of our thoughts and memories. This memory theory points out that we are not our physical body. Locke mentioned that the thing that makes you you is your consciousness. He believed that "personal identity persists over time because you retain memories of yourself at different points, and each of those memories is connected to one before it". Thus, even though I do not remember what I felt and thought when I was 10 years old, I am still connected to that version of me through a chain of memory. Such memory link suggests that I must be the same person as the person when I was 10 years old because I was the only one in the world who could experience the memory from the perspective of "me".

Problems of the Memory Theory

The memory theory seems more convincing to me than the body theory because I believe that the bodily substance is subjected to changes much more easily. However, same as the body theory, it does not solve all the problems. For instance, do you remember being born? Indeed, no

one recalls the experience of being born. Does it mean that we are not the same persons as the one coming out of our mothers' womb? I believe that we are still the same persons. Moreover, if a person suffers from amnesia which makes him lose the ability to remember his past, is he still the same person? Another problem is that there are false memories. If we remember something inaccurately, does it make us the same persons we were?

Problems lie on the nature of consciousness as well. Let's imagine a case. If Peter killed somebody after he has become drunk, but he claims that he has no memory of it and he was unaware that he has committed the crime, is he guilty? The memory theory would suggest that Peter, the psychological being, is not guilty because he does not have the memory of it. But the problem is, how do we know that we are really judging "the same Peter"? As Kandel mentioned in his book *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind*, consciousness are subjective in nature.

Subjectivity of consciousness implies that "[w]e experience our own ideas, moods, and sensations directly, whereas we can only appreciate another person's experience indirectly". (Kandel 185) There is no one other than myself who can experience in the exact same way as I do. If, as the memory theory supports, a person is responsible for his actions only if he is conscious, it is impossible for us to truly know whether Peter was unconscious as he claims. In such case, we can only judge by Peter's action by his physical body that he is guilty, even though Peter might be genuine.

Other Possibilities

The body theory and the memory theory are two of the answers given by people to the question "Who are you?". There are many other answers that I consider secondary and choose not to explain in detail.

The Brain Theory

The brain theory is similar to the body theory except that it suggests the key to being the same person is having the same brain. It has the same problem with the body theory that our body parts are constantly changing. In addition, the split-brain experiment conducted by Gazzaniga and Sperry suggests without a complete brain, humans can still perform tasks and have consciousness as normal, despite certain limitations (Brogaard, “Split Brains”). Let’s say that my brain is split into two halves and are put into two skulls to create two living human beings, which of them is the “real me”?

The Soul Theory

Some people argue that the immaterial soul is the key to being the same person. Philosophers such as Plato and Aquinas might support this view as they believe that soul exists distinctly from the body and it is immortal, which makes it qualified to be the constant essential property of being the same person over time. However, the existence of “soul” itself is untestable. In fact, if we think from the perspective of modern science, this idea can at most be a hypothesis. Moreover, as philosopher John Perry mentioned in his Yale lecture, the soul can be constantly changing but we still have the same personality, so we are unaware of it. (“Lecture 11—Personal Identity”) To me, this theory is too mysterious. For the memory theory, at least there is evidence that we have memories. Thus, from my point of view, the soul theory is less convincing than the memory theory.

Conclusion

Theories mentioned can offer a way of thinking for us. For me, the

memory theory is by far the most persuasive one. It does have its flaws, but at least it explains why I behave consistently and that I am uniquely me as long as I experience my private memories. After all, there is no right answer. We can only answer the question “Who are you?” by ourselves according to what we believe in and approach life in our own ways.

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Teacher's comment:

In Oi Yan's paper, she has clearly explained the different possible definitions of "who am I?" and then analysed them carefully one by one. Her logical rigour is reflected in her comments on the strength and weakness of these definitions. Moreover, within the words of her explanations, she can demonstrate her ability to integrate a diverse range of ideas on this

topic, inside and outside the scope of our course—from *Sophie's World*, to Eric Kandel's bibliography; from Plato and Aristotle, to John Locke's philosophy; and from Franz Kafka's Novel to John Perry's lecture. This is an exemplary paper that illustrates the importance of a habit of reading widely and the power of general education. (Kiang Kai Ming)