

What make us who we are? Discussion on the nature of personal identity

INTRODUCTION

This presentation illustrates the nature of identity, in relation to properties, persistence and behaviour (Krane & Farkas, 2011). It begins with a review of the main theories related to properties: Universals & Particulars, Nominalism, Trope Theory and Bundle Theory (ibid.). Then, the discussion moves to the problem of identity over time (Gallois, 2016), arguing that while it seems necessary to accept change, this assumption generates some issues (ibid.). Finally, it outlines a connection between identity and behaviour, introducing a psychological framework (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2014) and appraising its implications on free will, through a compatibilist perspective (McKenna, 2019).

1. WHAT MAKES US WHO WE ARE

This question may be considered through an ontological perspective, the nature of being, covered first, or in terms of personal identity, the characteristics specifically defining human beings (Olson, 2023), discussed later.

1.1 Properties

1.1.1 Universals & Particulars

One of the first definition of being is attributed to Aristotle (Krane & Farkas, 2011). All things are made of two components: substance or the “primary being”, unique to each thing or particular, and properties or universals, that may be present in different things (Cohen et al., 2020; Orilia et al. 2020). Substance is described as a substratum, constant over time, while its features may change (Cohen et al., 2020).

Universals are distinguished in two types: fundamental and accidental, the first are essential to define a specific being, while the second are contingent (Gallois, 2016). For instance, for a dog, the property of being a four-legged is essential, while that of being affectionate is accidental.

A debated aspect of this theory concerns the nature of universals (Krane & Farkas, 2011). As these exist outside of our minds, they may either be abstract a priori entities, as per Plato transcendent view, or immanent entities, present within things, as argued by Aristotle (Orilia et al., 2020). In the last century, Armstrong, maintaining the latter position, claimed that universals are part of the material world and exist inside objects (Krane & Farkas, 2011). A specific instantiation is a “state of affairs”, with instantiation constituting a “primitive” connection between universals and particulars (ibid.).

1.1.2 Nominalism

A different view is presented by Nominalism, that rejects universals (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2015). This argues that assuming the existence of “mind-independent” properties is a redundant complication, each being simply has its own features (Orilia et al., 2020; Rodriguez-Pereyra 2015).

This perspective though arises the question of how two objects may have the same characteristics if there are no identical qualities to partake from (Krane & Farkas, 2011). Classical Nominalists introduces the concept of “resemblance”, explaining that two things may simply be like one another or similar to a third exemplary one (ibid.) Differently, Class Nominalism regards “properties as classes of things”, for example the property of courage is the group of people who are brave (Rodriguez – Pereyra, 2015).

1.1.3 Trope Theory

This view reconciles Universals & Particulars theory with Nominalism, admitting the existence of properties, but within objects themselves (Maurin, 2023). The manifestation of a property in an object constitutes a unique instantiation or trope, with its own spatiotemporal location (Krane & Farkas, 2011). All beings are composed by tropes, with no substratum (Campbell et al., 2023). Tropes represent the building blocks of the universe, an “Alphabet of Being” (ibid.). Similarities between things are explained by the fact that different tropes, although distinct, might be similar (Maurin, 2023).

1.1.4 Bundle Theory

Finally, Hume claims that everything, from human beings to plants, from animals to inanimate objects, is in a continuously evolving condition, with constantly changing features (Gordon-Roth, 2019). In every instant, we observe and experience both our own self and any other objects as a “bundle of perceptions” (Krane & Farkas, 2011). For people, this bundle is simply who we are (ibid.). Any idea of self or identify is rejected as a delusion of our own imagination (Gordon- Roth 2019; Noonan, 2022).

1.2 Identity

Discussing these theories, the idea of similarities among beings was introduced, but what is the difference between sharing the same qualities and being identical? And what does be identical mean? Identity is defined either as (Krane & Farkas, 2011.):

- Qualitative: A have all the same properties as B → with A and B being distinct entities;
- Numerical: A and B are one and the same.

According to Leibniz “Identity of indiscernibles Principle”, two objects must have at least a different feature otherwise they are one and the same, or in logical terms (Forrest, 2010):

- if, for every property F, object x has F if and only if object y has F, then x is identical to y
[$\forall F(Fx \leftrightarrow Fy) \rightarrow x=y$]

This principle implies that if two objects are qualitatively identical, they are also numerically identical (Krane & Farkas, 2011). For instance, two spheres, made of the same material, with the same size, same weight and density, in the same relative position from an object, even though sharing all properties are clearly two distinct individuals from an empirical perspective, but are they also distinct according to Leibniz Law? To address this issue, some philosophers suggest the existence of a property of “thisness or “haecceity”, being identical to oneself, specific to each being (Forrester, 2010).

The theories presented interpret differently the principle of indiscernible. While for Universals & Particulars and Bundle Theory qualitative identity implies numerical identity, this assumption is rejected by the other two (Krane & Farkas, 2011). Differently, for Trope Theory and Bundle theory particulars are reducible, for the first to a combination of tropes, for the second to perceptions, while not according to the other views (ibid.).

Both classifications seem to pose some critical implications for personal identity. If we are reducible to our components, once all of these are separated, what is left (Olson, 2023)? Is personal identity only an illusion (Gordon- Roth 2019; Noonan, 2022)? And if possessing the same properties is sufficient for one being to be the same as another, would it not become relatively simple to create copies of anybody, in the forms of clones or synthetic droids (Krane & Farkas, 2011)? In other words, it seems that only Nominalism, denying the existence of properties, rejecting both reducibility and Leibniz Laws, safeguards personal identity (Rodriguez- Pereyra, 2015).

		Is qualitative identity numerical identity?	
		YES	NO
Are particulars reducible?	YES	Bundle Theory	Trope Theory
	NO	The Theory of Universals & Particulars	Nominalism

2 IDENTITY OVER TIME

In this chapter, the discussion moves from a synchronic concept of identity to a diachronic one exploring the problem of persistence over time (Gallois, 2016). This problem may be framed in two statements (ibid.):

- If an object truly changes, then the same object does not exist in T_0 and T_1
- But if no object remains the same then there is no change at all.

Consider the example of Theseus ship: the king's vessel is displayed in the harbour to commemorate his enterprises, but its parts need to be constantly substituted and in time none of the original ones remain, while the structure is preserved (Krane & Farkas, 2011). Simultaneously the old parts are used to rebuild, even though in precarious conditions, the original ship in a warehouse (ibid.). Which one is Theseus ship?

2.1 Rejecting change

The first option is to deny change, as proposed by Presentism (Krane & Farkas, 2011). This position claims that only present exists, there are no past nor future (Ingram et al., 2022). This assumption is defended as easy to grasp intuitively and it implies all things, living or inanimate, do not change as they exist only in an instant (ibid.).

Differently, Chisholm accepts both earlier statements and introduces a concept of "successive entities" for inanimate things (Krane & Farkas, 2011.) Objects do not change in time, yet their new versions are connected to previous ones, according to an idea of "loose" identity" (Gallois, 2016).

Another solution is presented by Lewis through a four-dimensional perspective (Dixon, NA). Objects do not change, only their parts do (Gallois, 2016). Different characteristics pertains to different parts of the object in different points in time, so that entities may either endure (without any changes at all) or perdure (with changes to their parts) (Krane & Farkas, 2011).

2.2 Making sense of change

If change is accepted, it is necessary to explain diachronic identity, particularly in terms of personal identity (Deutsch et al., 2022). According to the Theory of Universals & Particulars, the substratum offers a base for continuity while accidental properties may change (Gallois, 2016). But is the substratum? And how and which properties may actually change to ensure continuity? Consider that similarly to Theseus' ship, our basic components are substituted during our lives (Fischetti et al., 2021). 1% of our cells are replaced daily, so that approximately every 3 months we are almost entirely "re-made" brand-new, while all old cells are discarded with the only exceptions of cells in the eyes, heart and brain (ibid.).

The theories outlined to address these questions may be grouped in two currents, those leaning towards a physical perspective and those towards a psychological one (Krane & Farkas, 2011).

2.2.1 Physical views

These views claim that continuity depends on our bodies rather than our minds (Olsen, 2009). Specifically, Animalism argues that human beings are animals like any other, whose persistence over time is related to their being alive: as far as biological functions continue, identity is preserved (Blatti, 2019).

For instance, if a person survives a severe accident and is kept permanently in a pharmacological coma, does she preserve her personal identity as she continues to breathe and process food? Or if a person A has a lethal brain tumour and it is possible to transplant into her, the brain of donor B, would the new combination of A body + B brain still be A then (Olsen, 2009)?

2.2.2 Psychological Views

These theories regard the mind as the repository of continuity (Krane & Farkas, 2011). Personal identity is preserved through "psychological relations", that some philosophers, such as Locke, identify with memory (Gallois, 2016). Memory is intended as the ability to remember one's life actions and events (Gordon-Roth, 2019). But what kind of memories matter, trivial ones, e.g. what we had for lunch last Sunday, or more substantial ones, such as our childhood?

A famous critique to Locke theory was presented in the 18th century by Thomas Reid, with the "brave officer" example (Folescu, NA):

- Time₁: as a boy the officer (O) is punished in for stealing from an orchard;
- Time₂: in his youth, O is awarded a medal of valour in battle, while preserving the memory of T₁;
- Time₃: O in his old age is promoted to general, he still remembers T₂, but he forgot T₁.

Hence:

- O in T₁ has Memory 1 (M1)
- O in T₂ = has M1 and M2
- O in T₃ has only M2 and M3

So that applying the transitive property, O in T_3 then is not the same as O in T_1 . A solution consists in shifting from transitive property to causal relation, creating a connection from T_1 to T_2 then from T_2 to T_3 and for all upcoming times till T_N , so that even though the soldier in T_1 is not equal to soldier in T_3 , yet T_3 came into existence because of T_2 , which was brought into existence by T_1 and so on (Olsen 2019).

Another problem is raised by branching or fission (ibid.). If A 's brain is equally divided and inserted in two droids, each containing all her memories, which one will be A? Or are they both her?

Another issue if related to morality (Sheridan, 20216). According to Locke persistence together with agency is essential to ensure that individuals are acknowledged for their merits and held responsible for their transgressions (Sheridan, 2016). For instance, if somebody serving a life sentence in prison, after 20 years since the crime, suffers from dementia with no memories left of the past, may he still be considered the same person and is the state entitled to continue to detain him?

2.2.3 Perpetual Change

Finally, as briefly mentioned in the previous section, Bundle Theory offers a different perspective (Gordon- Roth, 2019). We exist in an endless flux of perpetual change, with no continuity and no identity, any such conception is but an illusion of our imagination (ibid.). This perspective may be exemplified with Heraclitus immortal words (Heraclitus, 2020):

"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man".

3 Identity and Behaviour

Until this point, identity was considered in isolation, but what is its relationship with our behaviour? To answer this question, this session introduces a psychological framework, explaining identity in terms of personality (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2014). Then, the discussion continues, using Compatibilism to appraise these theories in relation to free will (McKenna, 2019).

3.1 A psychology framework

In psychology, personality is defined as the combination of thoughts, emotions and behaviours that constitutes the way a person interacts with the environment, both materially and socially (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2014). There are different theories explaining how personality (P) is formed, the following are more aligned with a deterministic perspective (ibid):

- Freud Psychoanalytic Theory: P has 3 components:
 - the id, present since birth, made of simple drives to attain pleasure and avoid suffering;
 - the Ego keeping the id in check vs. reality constraints;
 - the Superego introducing a moral dimension of right and wrong, acquired through education.

And P is permanently shaped by our 5th birthday (Frosh, 2021);

- Behavioural Theory claims that P is formed through a process of environmental conditioning acquired through one's actions and their consequences, as well as the observations of others' (Woollard, 2010). This theory, while allowing room for change over time, presents humans as passive actors in their own lives (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2014);
- Genetical Theory: P is the results of genes expression (Buss et al., 1989);
- Evolutionary Theory: P is shaped according to the characteristic that ensure the best opportunities for survival and reproduction (ibid.).

While others are more distant from determinism (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2014):

- Cognitive Theory: an empirical approach claiming that P is defined by the way individuals mentally represent information and how through this active process interpret the world and act in it (Williams et al., 1988). This view considers agency as the engine driving human lives, prevailing on all other factors, including environment (ibid.);
- Humanist Theory: while not denying the existence of basic biological needs, this approach concentrates on self-actualization, a desire to develop one's potential and capabilities (Maslow, 2012).

Psychology offers also various models, differently related to these theories, for the appraisal of personality and the prediction of attitudes and behaviours (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2014). Many of these models reduce the complexity of character into five basic traits (or properties): openness to change, consciousness, extroversion/introversion, agreeableness and neuroticism (ibid.).

3.2 A compatibilist approach

Compatibilism is the philosophical theory reconciling determinism with free will (Krane & Farkas, 2011). It is articulated around two fundamental points (ibid.):

- Free will is preserved if the factors affecting behaviour are internal and within our control, affected only by our own beliefs and desires;
- free will is interpreted as the possibility for an agent to have acted otherwise if she had chosen to do so.

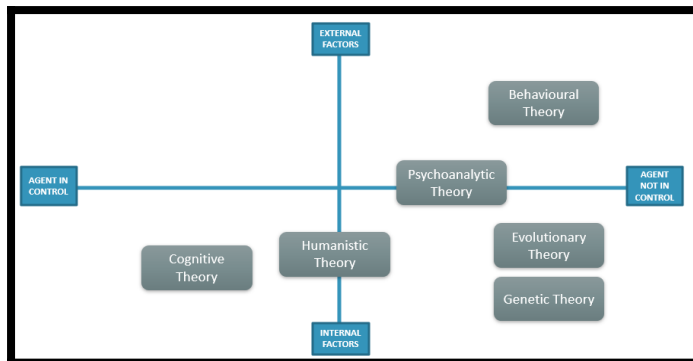
In response to critiques from incompatibilists, in the 20th century, Frankfurt outlined an attack to the principle of alternative possibilities (PAP), with an example (Robb, 2020)

"Jones decides to kill Smith. Black is aware of this and is keen for Jones to fulfil his plans, hence he secretly puts an arrangement in place to manipulate Jones, without his knowledge. This arrangement ensures that even though Jones will change his mind, he will kill Smith. In the end Jones murders Smith of his own will, without any external intervention".

This thought experiment shows that Jones acted without external influences and yet he could have not acted otherwise. So, it demonstrates that even though there are no alternative scenarios, an agent can still be regarded as morally free (ibid.).

Now, using this theoretical view, the psychological theories presented may be plotted on two dimensions:

- the influence of internal vs. external factors on P
- agents' degree of control in shaping their P and actions



Bottom left quadrant, the Cognitive theory satisfies both criteria, while Behavioural one top right denies both, agents are at the mercy of the environment and its forces, being these directed to their best interests (e.g. caring teachers) or against them (e.g. rough neighbourhood) (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2014; McKenna, 2019).

Differently the Evolutionary approach deprives human beings of their agency considering them like animals, at the mercy of uncontrollable drivers (Woollard, 2010). Genetical theory on the other hand does not directly reject free initiative, but it claims that all our characteristics and dispositions depend on our genes (Buss et al., 1989).

Moving towards the centre, the Psychoanalytic view adheres to a deterministic stance, instinctive desires and external factors shape who we are and how we behave (Frosh, 2021). Applying Frankfurt analysis of PAP, it seems that the crucial point here is the level of independence that the individual has from instinctive desires, thanks to the ego and superego ability to steer our behaviour, an aspect requiring further analysis outside the scope of this discussion (McKenna et al., 2019).

Finally, the Humanist approach is more nuanced with its hierarchy of desires (McIntyre, 2007). It argues that the strive towards self-actualization is the ultimate driver of our decisions, trumping primordial needs outside of our control (ibid.) and thus preserving apparently the conditions set by Compatibilism (Krane & Farkas, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Summarizing, the first section presented the theories of properties: Universals & Particulars, Nominalism, Trope Theory and Bundle Theory (Krane & Farkas, 2011). The first three views acknowledge the existence of similarities among beings based on universals or on the instantiations of alike features (Campbell et al., 2023). Only Nominalism rejects both the existence of properties and its consequences, protecting alone our uniqueness (Krane & Farkas, 2011).

The second section presented the issue of identity over time, appraising the implications of three different views of change (Ingram et al., 2022; Dixon, NA; Gallois, 2016; Gordon-Roth, 2019)

- Its rejection
- Its acceptance and theories of continuity
- Change as perpetual flux.

Even though empirically change seems evident, it remains difficult to explain continuity (Krane & Farkas, 2011). And as Locke argues, this is necessary to preserve an idea of identity over time and assign merit and responsibility, a principle at base for of our society (Olsen 2019).

In the final section, a psychological framework was introduced, regarding properties as features of our character and drivers of our behaviour (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2014). These theories were appraised through a Compatibilist approach, finding only the Cognitive view, an empirical approach, fully preserving free will and Humanistic one offering some hope (McKenna et al., 2019; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2014).

In conclusion, it appears that sometimes besides appraising the solidity of theories, it is crucial to consider their consequences on the way we interpret ourselves and our relation to others, so as human beings we might chose to favour the assumptions that preserve our way of life (Gordon-Roth, 2019).

List of References

- Blatti, S. (2019) Animalism [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/animalism/>> [Accessed 1 July 2023].
- Buss, D. and Cantor, M. (1989) Personality Psychology, Recent Trends and Emerging Directions [on line]. Springer, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. Available at <https://www.google.it/books/edition/Personality_Psychology/buK4BgAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1> [Accessed 18 June 2023].
- Campbell, F., Franklin, J. and Ehring, D. (2023) Donald Cary Williams [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/williams-dc/>> [Accessed 1 July 2023].
- Cohen, S.M. and Reeve, C.D.C. (2020) Aristotle's Metaphysics [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/>> [Accessed 16 April 2023].
- Deutsch, H. and Garbacz, P. [2022] Relative Identity [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-relative/>> [Accessed 16 April 2023].
- Dixon, S. (NA) David Lewis [on line]. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://iep.utm.edu/d-lewis/>> [Accessed 1 July 2023].
- Fischetti, M. & Christiansen, J. (2021) Our Bodies Replace Billions of Cells Every Day - Blood and the gut dominate cell turnover [on line]. Scientific American. Available at <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/our-bodies-replace-billions-of-cells-every-day/#:~:text=About%20330%20billion%20cells%20are,equivalent%20of%20a%20new%20you>> [Accessed 17 June 2023].
- Folescu, M. (NA) Thomas Reid: Philosophy of Mind [on line]. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://iep.utm.edu/reidmind/#H3>> [Accessed 1 July 2023].
- Forrest, P. (2010) Identity of Indiscernibles [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-indiscernible/>> [Accessed 7 May 2023].
- Frosh, S. (2021) A brief introduction to psychoanalysis [on line]. Red Globe Press, London, UK. <<https://books.google.it/books?id=J5IGEAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>> [Accessed 18 June 2023].
- Gallois, A. (2016) Identify over time [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-time/>> [Accessed 16 April 2023].
- Gordon-Roth, J. (2019) Locke on Personal Identity [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-personal-identity/>> [Accessed 1 July 2023].
- Heraclitus 2020, Fragments. Digireads.com Publishing. Overland Park, Kansas, USA.
- Ingram, D. and Tallant, J. (2022) Presentism [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/presentism/>> [Accessed 24 June 2023].
- Krane, T. and Farkas, K. (2011) Metaphysics, a guide and anthology. Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom.
- Maslow, A. H. (2012). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs [on line]. Research History. Available at <<https://www.researchhistory.org/2012/06/16/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs/?print=1>> [Accessed 18 June 2023].
- Maurin, A. (2023) Tropes [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/tropes/>> [Accessed 16 April 2023].
- McIntyre, S. (2007) Maslow's Theory Revisited [online]. The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley. Available at <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/maslows_theory_revisited> [Accessed 18 June 2023].
- McKenna, M. and Coates, D.J. (2019) Compatibilism [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/compatibilism/>> [Accessed 17 June 2023].
- Nolen-Hoeksema, S., Fredrickson, B.L., Loftus G.R. and Lutz, C. (2014) Atkinson & Hilgard's INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGY. Cengage Learning EMEA, Andover, United Kingdom.
- Noonan, H. and Curtis, B. (2022) Identity [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity/>> [Accessed 16 April 2023].
- Olson, E. T. (2023) Personal Identity [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-personal/>> [Accessed 16 April 2023].
- Orilia F. and Paolini Paletti, M. (2020) Properties [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/properties/>> [Accessed 16 April 2023].
- Robb, D. (2020) Moral Responsibility and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities [on line]. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/alternative-possibilities/>> [Accessed 1 July 2023].
- Rodriguez- Pereyra. G. (2015) Nominalism in Metaphysics [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nominalism-metaphysics/>> [Accessed 1 July 2023].
- Sheridan, P. (2016) Locke's Moral Philosophy [on line]. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-moral/>> [Accessed 26 June 2023].
- Williams, S.L. and Cervone, D. (1998). Social Cognitive Theories of Personality [on line]. In: Barone, D.F., Hersen, M., Van Hasselt, V.B. (eds) Advanced Personality. The Plenum Series in Social/Clinical Psychology. Springer, Boston, MA. Available at <https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4419-8580-4_8#citeas> [Accessed 18 June 2023].
- Woollard, J. (2010) Psychology in the classroom: Behaviorism. [on line]. Routledge, Oxon, UK. Available at <<https://books.google.it/books?id=1BLHBQAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>> [Accessed 18 June 2023].

