

# Sydney Shoemaker

## *Identity & identities*

In its primary meaning, the noun 'identity' refers to the relation each thing has to itself and to no other thing. In the language of the logicians, this relation is transitive (if A is identical to B and B is identical to C, then A is identical to C), symmetrical (if A is identical to B, B is identical to A), and reflexive (everything is identical to itself). In addition, it is governed by Leibniz's Law, the principle that says that if A is identical to B, whatever is true of A is true of B. In ordinary speech, the relation is expressed by the terms 'identical' and 'same.' But in addition to being used to express 'numerical' identity, the relation that here concerns us, these terms are also used to express 'qualitative' identity, i.e., exact similarity. The phrase, 'one and the same,' on

the other hand, always expresses numerical identity. When philosophers talk about identity, they are usually referring to identity in this sense.

Nonphilosophers, when offered a discussion of identity, are often puzzled and disappointed to find that it is identity in this 'logical' sense that is under consideration. They wonder how identity as the relation everything has to itself and to no other thing can be of any interest, and how, if at all, it is related to what they regard as clearly of interest, namely, the notion that figures in such expressions as 'quest for identity,' 'identity crisis,' 'loss of identity,' and (most recently) 'identity theft.'

But the 'logical' conception of identity – numerical identity – is far from foreign to ordinary folk; on the contrary, it is pervasive in everyday discourse. It is one of the notions expressed by the word 'is': it is in play whenever anyone judges that a car in the parking lot is hers, or that someone she now sees is the person she was introduced to yesterday. The adjectives 'same' and 'identical' are regularly used to communicate this concept. What is foreign to many is the use of the noun 'identity' to express it. The noun has been appropriated to articulate a different, though undoubtedly related, notion.

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I will have a good deal to say about identity in – to steal a phrase from Bishop Butler – the “strict and philosophical sense.”<sup>1</sup> (I will sometimes shorten this to ‘strict.’) But first I should say something about its relation to what the noun ‘identity’ is, these days, often used to talk about – identities as entities possessed, and sometimes lost, by individuals, usually persons.

In the latter sense, one can speak of identities in the plural, and of an identity. One might suppose that the identity of a thing is just whatever it is that makes that thing the thing it is. Then the relation between identity in this sense and identity in the strict sense would be very close. Each thing would have its own identity, and things A and B would be identical just in case the identity of A is the same as the identity of B. It is a matter of debate whether there are identities in this sense – individual essences, as they are sometimes called. But if there are, they are not things that can be lost or stolen. If someone loses his identity, the person after the loss is the same as – is numerically identical with – the person who was there before; so what is lost cannot be what makes the person the person he is.

Instead of thinking of an identity as an individual essence, we might do better to think of it as something, perhaps a set of traits, capacities, attitudes, etc., that an individual normally retains over a considerable period of time and that

normally distinguishes that individual from other individuals. Identities in this sense can be lost and, to a certain extent, stolen (as when someone else gets control of one’s bank accounts, credit card numbers, etc.). There is still a connection with identity in the strict sense. What makes a set of traits an identity is its being such that, normally, numerically different individuals have different sets of traits of this sort, and, normally, an individual retains the set of traits over time – where this means that numerical identity between an individual existing at a certain time and an individual at a later time goes, normally, with the individual having (more or less) the same set of traits at both times.

Of course, more is involved in the notion of an identity. It is usually persons, rather than objects, who are said to have identities, and the traits involved are usually psychological. Moreover, a person’s identity is usually understood as in some crucial way involving the person’s self-conception, which includes a structure of aims and values.

There is a colloquial use of ‘same person’ with which one can say that as the result of a religious conversion, a course of therapy, or the like, someone is not the same person she was before. On pain of contradiction, this cannot be a literal use of ‘same’ to express numerical identity – for it is one and the same person who is said to be not the same person at a later time as at an earlier time. This use of ‘same person,’ however, goes naturally with the notion of identities as things persons have. And it perhaps gives us a sense in which a person’s identity is what makes her the person she is. As noted earlier, if identities can be acquired or lost, they cannot be individual essences. But perhaps we can say that the retention of a per-

1 Butler uses this phrase, contrasting identity in the “strict and philosophical sense” with identity in a “loose and popular sense,” in his “Of Personal Identity,” the first appendix to his *The Analogy of Religion*, first published in 1736. His own requirements for identity in the strict sense seem unacceptably strict – he thought that the change of composition of a tree over time disqualifies the later tree from being strictly identical with the earlier one.

son's identity over time is what makes her the same person over time in this colloquial sense, though not in the strict sense.

I will say more later about how identity in this sense – in which there are identities in the plural, and each thing (or at least each person) has one – is related to identity in the strict and philosophical sense. But now let's consider what sorts of issues surround the latter.

Discussions of strict identity are not generally about the nature of this relation as such. There is not much to say about that beyond what I said in my opening paragraph. What is discussed, and what there are substantive disagreements about, is the identity of particular sorts of things – the identity of persons being far and away the most contested topic. An inquiry into the nature of the identity of so-and-so's (persons, rivers, sets, or whatever) will be an inquiry into the identity conditions for so-and-so's, i.e., the truth conditions for statements of identity about so-and-so's.

There is a good case for saying that such an inquiry is really an inquiry into the nature of so-and-so's, e.g., sets or persons. The philosopher W. V. Quine famously said, "No entity without identity," which we can take to mean that each kind of entities has a distinctive set of identity conditions. And he pointed out that our grasp of the nature of a kind of things is at least partly a grasp of what counts as being the same thing of that kind.<sup>2</sup> To use his example, we understand what sets are only if we understand that sets are identical just in case they have the same members. And

2 See his "Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis" in W. V. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed. rev. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

we know what a river is only if we know what counts as being the same river – e.g., what makes portions of water parts of the same river. John Perry has illustrated this point with the example of baseball games.<sup>3</sup> A baseball game is a series of baseball events – pitches, hits, runs, etc. – and someone knows what a baseball game is only if he has tacit knowledge of the relations among such events, what Perry calls the unity relations, that make them parts of a single game. One must have such knowledge to distinguish a single game from a doubleheader, and to distinguish different games being played simultaneously on adjacent fields.

The identity judgments that have attracted the most attention in inquiries about the identity conditions for particular sorts of things are transtemporal identity judgments: those saying that something existing at one time is the same as something existing at another time. Some have thought that all informative judgments of identity are of this sort – thus Hume: "We cannot, in any propriety of speech, say, that an object is the same with itself, unless we mean, that the object existent at one time is the same with itself existent at another time."<sup>4</sup> This is not true – it can be informative to be told that the building with the imposing stone pillars in the front is the same as the one with the rusty fire escape in the rear, and here there is no mention of different times. Nonetheless, it is judgments of transtemporal identity that have most often been found puzzling.

3 See his "The Problem of Personal Identity" in John Perry, ed., *Personal Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

4 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.4.2.

In part, the puzzlement over the phenomenon of change, of the same thing having different properties at different times, stems from confusing numerical identity with qualitative identity (exact similarity), for of course the state of the thing after the change will not be qualitatively the same as its state prior to the change. Change will also seem baffling, indeed impossible, if one misunderstands Leibniz's Law as implying that a thing A existing at one time is identical with a thing B existing at another only if A's properties at the one time are the same as B's properties at the other (what it does imply is that if A has certain properties at a time, B has those same properties at that time).

But these confusions aside, it is in many cases problematic just what constitutes the identity of something existing at one time with something existing at a different time; indeed, it can seem unclear how *anything* could constitute it, which has led some to think that transtemporal identity is something simple and not analyzable. And nowhere has transtemporal identity been more problematic than in the case of persons.

Discussion of the topic of personal identity as currently conceived began with the seminal discussion of "Identity and Diversity" in John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke had much to say, some of it puzzling, about the identity of persons, but what influenced subsequent discussion as much as anything else was his striking example in which the soul of a Prince, "carrying with it the consciousness of the Prince's past life," is transferred to the body of a cobbler.<sup>5</sup> Locke says that

after this soul-transfer the person with the cobbler's body would be the same person with the (former) Prince – and not because he has his soul (thought of as an immaterial substance) but because he has his memories.

In more recent versions of the example, brain transplants replace soul transfers.<sup>6</sup> Such examples are taken to show that personal identity over time consists in something psychological. Locke called it "sameness of consciousness," which has been taken to consist in memory continuity in the case of transtemporal identity. Later versions of the view hold it to consist in 'psychological continuity': roughly, the existence of a series of mental states whose later members grow out of its earlier ones in certain ways, a central instance of this being the production by mental states of memories of themselves. Thus, the 'persistence conditions' of persons are psychological. According to one version of the view (mine), the psychological continuity that constitutes identity over time consists in the various mental states playing out over time their causal or functional roles – generating the successor states and behaviors that is the nature of states of their kind to produce.

In Locke's time the chief competitor to the psychological view was the view that personal identity consists in the identity of an immaterial substance, of the sort Descartes held each of us to be. In recent discussion its chief competitor has been the view that personal identity consists in the identity of a human body or human organism. The latter view, especially the 'animalist' version of it that says persons (of our sort) are just human animals, has a good claim to be the com-

5 John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1975), 340.

6 See Sydney Shoemaker, *Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963), 23ff.

nonsense view of the matter – that we are animals (hopefully rational ones) seems a commonplace.<sup>7</sup>

Neo-Lockeans must say either that, contrary to what it seems natural to suppose, the persistence conditions of human animals are psychological rather than biological (allowing animals to change bodies by way of brain transplants), or that the ‘is’ in ‘A person is an animal’ is the ‘is’ of constitution (as in ‘An army is just a collection of men’) rather than the ‘is’ of identity.

Where the animalist view seems counterintuitive is in its denial of the ‘transplant intuition’ – the intuition that if the result of transplanting A’s brain into B’s head is that the resulting person remembers A’s past life as his own, and is in all other respects psychologically continuous with A, then the resulting person is A with a new body. Animalists sometimes argue that, since the lower brain is the biological-control center of the organism, they are not committed to denying that in a transplant of the whole brain the person would go with the brain. But they are committed to denying that in a transplant of just the cerebrum (without the lower brain) the person would go with the cerebrum – even if this resulted in full psychological continuity between donor and recipient. Supposing that A’s brainstem is left behind in the original body, kept alive with an artificial-support system, the animalist must hold that, after the transplant, A is that ‘human vegetable,’ not the person with B’s body and A’s cerebrum who remembers A’s life ‘from the inside’ and passes every psychological test for being A. Neo-Lockeans find this more counterintuitive than their own denial that persons are

strictly identical with, rather than merely constituted by, biologically individuated animals.

In recent years a different aspect of the topic of personal identity has moved to the forefront of the discussion. In the case of persons identity seems to *matter* in a way it doesn’t matter in the case of other things. We won’t much care if a car or washing machine is replaced by a different one, as long as the replacement is as good as the original. But this replacement-indifference does not extend to family and friends. And it certainly does not apply to ourselves.

Central to virtually every person’s concerns is the desire to continue in existence with a life worth living. In some important sense, survival of persons ‘matters,’ especially to the persons themselves. And survival seems to involve identity. Locke remarked that ‘person’ is a “forensic” term, because of the tie between personal identity and such matters as responsibility and compensation; and clearly the fact that the person held responsible for an action should be the person who did the action, and the person compensated for a wrong should be the person who suffered from it, is intimately related to the fact that people care about their own futures in the way they do.

But recent discussion, especially the work of Derek Parfit, has questioned whether it is really identity that matters to us when we care about our survival, or that of friends and family.<sup>8</sup> Consider a much-discussed variation on our brain-transplant example. Suppose that instead of the brain being transplanted as a whole to a different body, the two brain hemispheres are separately trans-

7 See Eric T. Olson, *The Human Animal – Personal Identity Without Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

8 Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

planted to different bodies.<sup>9</sup> And suppose that both hemisphere recipients are, after the transplants, psychologically continuous with the original person.

We can call this ‘fission.’ The fission products are not identical with one another (they are in different hospital beds, and will soon go their separate ways), so it can’t be that both are identical with the original person. If survival implies identity, the person does not survive as both (and, arguably, does not survive as either, since there is nothing that could make one rather than the other identical with the original person).

Yet it seems plausible that each has to the original person what ‘matters’ in survival. If the original person knew he was about to undergo fission, it would seem that, while he might not relish the prospect, he would not regard it as simply equivalent to death. He would care about the well-being of the fission products as he would for his own future well-being.

Supposing one agrees that this case shows that identity is not what matters in survival, this view can play out in two ways. Suppose first that one is a neo-Lockean, and holds that personal identity consists in something psychological. Allowing the possibility of fission will require one to qualify the claim that psychological continuity constitutes personal identity over time; to avoid saying that both fission products are identical with the original person one will have to say that what constitutes identity is *non-branching* psychological continuity. Then one can say that what matters in survival

is psychological continuity, which normally goes with identity (when branching does not occur) but is compatible with the absence of identity (when fission, or branching, does take place). As a result, what matters in survival is still psychological continuity, but not necessarily personal identity.

Now suppose instead that one is an animalist, and thinks that personal identity consists in biological continuity. If one believes that in the fission case there is ‘what matters’ in survival (even though the original individual does not survive), one will agree with the neo-Lockean that what matters is psychological continuity. And one will also agree with the neo-Lockean that in normal cases, where no branching takes place, this will go with personal identity. But as an animalist one will not agree that what matters – psychological continuity – is something that partly constitutes personal identity and guarantees it in the absence of branching.

An animalist may think, however, that he can explain the plausibility of the transplant intuition.<sup>10</sup> He will agree with the neo-Lockean that in the original brain-transplant (or cerebrum-transplant) case it would be reasonable to treat the recipient *as if* he were the original person – extend to him whatever attitudes, e.g., friendship, that one had toward the original person. And he will agree with the neo-Lockean that it would be reasonable for the future directed concern of the transplant donor to be directed at the transplant recipient rather than at the human vegetable left behind – although according to the animalist view it is the latter the donor will, strictly speaking, be – because it is to the transplant recipient that the transplant donor will stand in the relation that

9 This case was first presented in David Wiggins, *Identity and Spatio-temporal Continuity* (n.p.: Blackwell, 1967). As Wiggins points out, the example requires that the two hemispheres be “equipollent,” instead of being specialized in the usual way (linguistic ability based in the left hemisphere, etc.).

10 See Olson, *The Human Animal*.

‘matters’ in survival. Because these attitudes – future concern and its third-person counterpart – are ones that normally accompany belief in identity, we would naturally think we have identity in the transplant case – thus the transplant intuition. But the animalist will hold this intuition is an illusion that stems from a failure to distinguish two things that normally go together – what matters in survival (viz, psychological continuity) and identity. On this view, unlike the neo-Lockean view, what matters in survival will not be even part of what constitutes personal identity.

Let’s now return to the common use of ‘identity’ in which each person has (normally) an identity, and identities are things that can be sought, lost, or stolen. This is the popular conception of identity, and henceforth I will refer to it as identity<sub>p</sub>. There is obviously some connection between this notion of identity and the fact that, so it initially seems, the identity over time of persons matters in a special way. To see what this connection is we need to look more closely at the notion of ‘mattering’ invoked here.

I oversimplified earlier when I had the neo-Lockean and the animalist agreeing that the relation that matters in survival is psychological continuity. The phrase ‘the relation that matters’ is ambiguous here. In one sense, there is the relation that matters between the state of person A existing at an earlier time and person B existing at a later time, if the states are so related that something’s being good or bad for person B at the later time constitutes its being good or bad for person A at the earlier time. For example, if B will receive some benefit at the later time, this is good in prospect for A at the earlier time (in a way that it is not good for just any arbitrary person); and if B will experience pain or unpleasantness

at the later time, this is bad for A in prospect at the earlier time (again in a way that it is not bad for just any arbitrary person). On the supposition we have been making about the fission case, persons existing at different times can stand in this relation even if they are not identical, as long as the right sort of psychological continuity links their stages at the two times. It seems plausible that if someone knows that he is about to undergo fission he will dread any torture he knows is in store for either offshoot, and will look forward to any pleasant experiences he knows are in store for either of them.

There can be the relation that matters in the sense just sketched even if the state of the later person were so bad that the earlier person would dread it and prefer death to survival if surviving led to that state. In a different sense, this sort of case is excluded, and a relation would count as the relation that matters only if it would be reasonable for the subject of the earlier state to prefer having the later state to going out of existence. Normally the relation between different stages of a person’s life is one that matters in the latter sense; or, at least, the person believes that if her present state is related to some future state by the relation that matters in the first sense, it is also related to it by the relation that matters in the second sense. But it is only in the first sense that psychological continuity can be, all by itself, the relation that matters. What matters in the second sense will be the kind of psychological continuity that occurs when someone’s life goes at least reasonably well.

But what counts as a life going well? This, of course, is a question to which we should not expect a short and simple answer. But it seems that what a person regards as a good life for herself is deter-

mined at least in part by the person's identity<sub>p</sub>, i.e., the person's self-conception and structure of goals, tastes, and values. As noted earlier, this will normally be relatively stable over time – so that the identity (in the strict sense) of a person over an interval of time normally goes with the person having pretty much the same identity<sub>p</sub> over that interval.

But it is possible for the identity<sub>p</sub> of a person to change radically – perhaps because of a religious conversion. Then what the person at the earlier time counts as a good life may be different from what the person at the later time counts as a good life. Thus, something that occurs at the later time that is good for the person from the vantage point of the identity<sub>p</sub> he has then may not be good for him from the vantage point of the different identity<sub>p</sub> he had earlier. Likewise, what is bad for him at the later time, given his identity<sub>p</sub> then, may not be bad for him, in prospect, at the earlier time.

We should not assume, of course, that judgments about what is good or bad for a person must always be relative to the person's identity<sub>p</sub> at a time; we are sometimes justified in regarding the values and goals that constitute a person's identity<sub>p</sub> as irrational and perverse, and his conception of what is a good life for himself as misguided. Still, our judgments about what is good or bad for a person cannot be independent of what we take to be the person's goals, aspirations, tastes, and values. And in the case where a person's identity<sub>p</sub> undergoes a radical change, we may not have the relation that matters in survival between different phases of the person's life, even though we have psychological continuity and clearly have the same person at the different times. So while psychological continuity is a necessary part of the relation that matters for survival, it is not

the whole of it. What is also required is enough stability in the person's identity<sub>p</sub> over the interval to have substantial agreement at the two times about what is good or bad for the person.

Different persons can have the same identity<sub>p</sub> – or at any rate, there can be as much similarity between the identities<sub>p</sub> of different persons as there is between the identities<sub>p</sub> of the same person at different times. So having the same identity<sub>p</sub> is not sufficient for being the same person. If we can have the relation that matters in survival in the fission case between the original person and the fission products, then even sameness of identity<sub>p</sub>, together with psychological continuity, is not sufficient for strict identity over time. And sameness of identity<sub>p</sub> is not necessary for strict identity, since a person can survive changes in his identity<sub>p</sub>. But sameness of identity<sub>p</sub>, or at least an approximation to this, does seem necessary to have the strict identity of persons over time that 'matters' in the special way that concerns us here (which is perhaps equivalent to being the same person in the colloquial sense). And in combination with psychological continuity it is sufficient for having the relation that matters in survival.

But given the possibility of the fission case, this combination is not sufficient for having the sort of strict identity over time that matters, even assuming the neo-Lockean view – for in that case there can be psychological continuity and sameness of identity<sub>p</sub> between a prefission person stage and stages of the fission offshoots. And on the animalist view it is not sufficient for strict identity even if the psychological continuity is nonbranching – for the animalist denies that we have strict identity in the cerebrum-transplant case, even though the donor and recipient share the same iden-



tity<sub>p</sub> and are related by nonbranching psychological continuity.

Although the notion of identity<sub>p</sub> frequently figures in discussions of moral philosophy, the metaphysics of identity<sub>p</sub> has not been much discussed by philosophers. What I have said about it here is much oversimplified. For one thing, I have not addressed the distinction between a change in a person's identity and a change in how that person conceives his or her identity, the latter occurring when a person realizes (or at least comes to believe) that the identity he has been presenting to the world, and to himself, is something imposed by his parents or peer group, and is not his 'real self.' Also, I have not addressed the fact that the reference of 'identity,' when it expresses identity<sub>p</sub>, seems to be context-relative, so that what in one context counts as a change of identity may in another context count as a change in a person's conception of what his identity is. And I have ignored the fact that the same person is sometimes said to have not one identity but several – ethnic, religious, professional, and so forth – where each of these identities is one the person shares with other persons.

I doubt if the uses of 'identity' (as a noun admitting of a plural) admit of a neat codification; what we have here may be what Wittgenstein called a "family resemblance concept." My aim has not been to produce such a codification, but simply to clarify the distinction between, and some of the relations between, identity in this sense and identity in the "strict and philosophical sense."