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A Dialogue On Personal Identity And Immortality (Hackett Philosophical Dialogues)

A
DIALOGUE
ON
PERSONAL IDENTITY
AND
IMMORTALITY

JOHN PERRY



Synopsis

Perry's excellent dialogue makes a complicated topic stimulating and accessible without any sacrifice of scholarly accuracy or thoroughness. Professionals will appreciate the work's command of the issues and depth of argument, while students will find that it excites interest and imagination. --David M. Rosenthal, CUNY, Lehman College

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is an excellent introduction to the issue of personal identity for the beginner, and it's a pretty good recap of the main issues for someone with more philosophical training who hasn't thought about this particular issue in a while. Perry's book manages to covers a lot of ground without getting bogged down in details, and the dialogue format makes it more engaging than your usual, textbook-format introduction to some philosophical question. Moreover, its compression makes it an excellent book to teach. Since the arguments are compressed and the bigger issues are usually just hinted at, there's a lot that can be said about the arguments presented in the book beyond what Perry comes right out and tells you. What is the question of personal identity? Basically, it's the question of what makes a person one and the same person through time. I assume I'm very same person I was two days ago, two months ago, two years ago, two decades ago, etc. Given that I've changed a great deal over that period of time, how could this be? What is it about me that makes me the same as the guy who was sitting in class two days ago, the guy who was anticipating spring

break two months ago, the guy who was entering grad school two years ago, the kid who was sitting in some kindergarten class two decades ago, etc.? There's been a lot of physical and psychological change over time, and yet I think I'm the very same person I was at those various times. How could that be? Perry discusses three views here. The first view is a sort of dualism according to which personal identity is a matter of the identity of souls across time. If this view is correct, what makes me the same as those guys is that we share a common soul. The second view is a sort of physical view according to which personal identity is a matter of identity of bodies across time. If this view is correct, what makes me the same as those guys is that we share a common body. The final view is a sort of psychological continuity view according to which personal identity is a matter of having appropriately related psychological states through time. So what makes me part of the same person as those guys is that there is a normal process of psychological development from the kindergarten kid through the first-year grad student through the guy sitting in class two days ago and up to me right now. And all of these views have problems that the interlocutors discuss. Some problems for the soul identity theorist: What is this soul, and how can we know about it? How can you account for the fact that we think persons are closely connected to their physical bodies? Some problems for the bodily identity theorist: How can you account for the fact that we seem to be able to imagine cases in which the same person switches bodies? How can you account for the apparent importance of issues of psychological continuity to our judgments about personal identity over time? How can you account for the fact that we seem able to figure out who we are simply through introspection? And some problems for the psychological continuity theorist: What exactly is the relevant kind of psychological continuity, and can it be defined in a non-circular manner (i.e. in a manner that doesn't assume facts about personal identity through time)? And if it reduces to a kind of similarity, couldn't I be psychologically continuous with lots of future (or past) people even though I can't be identical to lots of different future (or past) people? Each of these objections is pressed against the respective views, and some attempt is made to defend them against these criticisms. Since Perry's aim is to present the issues and the kinds of considerations that are relevant in thinking about personal identity, there is no attempt to reach a final conclusion on the issues. And Perry tries to bring out that this is a philosophical issue with an importance beyond philosophy. He does so by focusing on the implications of these various theories for the possibility of human immortality and for existence after bodily death. If the soul view is correct, it seems to secure the possibility of my existing after my bodily death. But there are worries here. First, there are worries about the independent plausibility of the soul view; and second, there are worries about whether the soul view can be spelled out in such a way that whatever survives my bodily death is something

recognizable as me. If the bodily identity view is correct, then it seems I exist only when my body does and thus survival of bodily death is impossible. Consequently, the prospects for immortality depend on the prospects for the eternal existence of my body. The issues are somewhat more complicated with the psychological continuity view. It seems to be consistent with my surviving bodily death, as it seems there could be a being with psychological states continuous with mine but who doesn't have a body. But things aren't as clear as they may seem unless we know something more about just what sort of psychological continuity we're talking about. On some views, the relevant sort of continuity requires something like the causal relations between psychological states that occur within the human brain. And if that's what kind of psychological continuity would be required for me to exist beyond my death, it's not at all clear that this allows for the possibility of survival after bodily death. I recommend this book for everyone interested in the question, and especially to those who are new to the subject. Perry both introduces the basics of the subject, and he presents variants on some classic and contemporary arguments in the literature. So the book also serves as an introduction to the literature on the subject. It would, of course, be helpful to supplement this book with Perry's collection on personal identity, which includes the classic work (by Locke, Butler, Reid, and Hume) on the subject and some of the most important recent work (by Shoemaker, Williams, Parfit, Nagel, et al).

In this delightful booklet John Perry, a philosophy professor at Stanford, discusses personal identity and immortality. It is implied that immortality is meaningless without personal identity, and therefore almost the entire argument is about personal identity really. The setting of the dialogue is dramatic: a philosophy teacher, Gretchen, lies dying in a hospital after a motorcycle accident. She is visited by two friends: Sam, a chaplain, and Dave, a former student. She asks them to comfort her and gives them an apparently easy task: to show that it is possible for personal identity to survive the death of the body. She does not ask them for good evidence or some probability estimate of this happening - but just for the logical possibility of the survival of personal identity. In other words she questions whether the idea of personal survival is even coherent, if it makes any sense at all. Of course Sam and Dave find it very difficult to convince her. I found the dialogue very readable with some flashes of humor, expressions of passion, anger, sadness - the whole lot one would expect in such a setting. And at the same time we get a good philosophical debate. Excellent. In the second night all three agree that personal identity is contingent on memory, or rather on the continuity of memory, but in a way I found very puzzling they all also immediately agree that there is an important distinction to be made between what one really remembers and what one only seems to remember. This, I think, is a

big mistake. There is of course an obvious difference between an atomic explosion and the simulation of an atomic explosion, but as far as experience goes "is" and "seems" are identical. When I see a red apple it makes no sense to wonder whether I may only seem to be seeing a red apple. There is no difference playing chess and simulating the playing of chess. Still, based on the distinction between remembering and seeming to remember Gretchen shoots down all arguments Sam and Dave propose for defending the very possibility of survival of personal identity after the death of the body. But, by that standard, personal identity is not possible even before death. After all how can I be certain that I remember my past? Maybe I only seem to remember what happened yesterday. Gretchen might have answered that the continuity of the body (and particularly of the brain) before death proves that what I remember is real - but then how do I know that yesterday I had the same body I have today? Maybe this too is a wrong memory. Another error I found in the argumentation is that the continuation of personal identity after the death of the body is imagined only through the recreation of a "heavenly person". This arbitrarily assumes that the "person" disappears at the death of the body and must therefore be recreated somehow - which shows that by "person" Perry (as all three characters in the dialogue agree on that) imagines some kind of body. To be fair in the first night Gretchen has shown that the idea of personal identity without the benefit of a body (i.e. the idea of the "soul") makes not sense because if souls existed we would know nothing about them. This argument is valid but is solipsistic in nature. After all neither can we know anything about other peoples' consciousness and still we assume that other people are conscious; in the same way we can safely assume that other people have souls. In fact I find that for all practical purposes "soul" and "consciousness" can be used interchangeably. Finally the idea of the possible recreation of a person in heaven is rendered absurd by pointing out that then it would be possible to create several identical heavenly bodies which would negate personal identity. But why is that? On what logical grounds must one assume a link between personal identity and uniqueness of body? This is what we empirically find to be the case in our condition in this life, but it is not logically necessary. I can easily imagine my personal identity experiencing through two bodies. Even worse, one can imagine a case where Gretchen's body while alive is copied atom by atom to create a second copy of her. Would this event in some way evaporate the original Gretchen's personal identity? Of course not. But if the possibility of producing several copies of the material body of Gretchen is not problematic, why should the same possibility when applied to her "heavenly body" be? In any case, this 49 page booklet was a joy to read - but also strangely upsetting: I wished I could find a way to insert myself in the book and argue against Gretchen. Which shows how taken I was by the story. Anyway I also learned something about the craft of

writing a philosophical dialogue: You never have all characters agree easily on anything. At least one character must question any claim introduced (no matter how obvious it may seem to the writer of the dialogue) and have other characters defend it before continuing.

Out of the two reviews I've read of Perry's dialogue here on , one speaks very highly and the other thinks it's worthless. I'm puzzled about the variation, for I think this dialogue is as good as they get, which leads me to believe that the negative reviewer perhaps didn't understand the subtleties of the dialogue. I recently used Perry's dialogue along with five others in my intro to philosophy classes. Perry's far outranks all the others in depth and sophistication, which is also to say that it is more difficult than the others (the others included free will, personhood in animals and machines, philosophy, religion, relativism, abortion). Keep in mind that popular philosophy dialogues always have one big drawback: the authors usually attempt to present the participants in a real-life setting, which often results in some dead ends or useless material. Such is the case with light and colloquial conversations. Perry's is not immune. Weinrob (the skeptic) often blusters and sometimes comes off a bit too arrogant. But at the end of the day she wins (well actually, she dies!) by taking apart the arguments of Miller (the soul, then Lockean, then causal theorist). There's no room here to go over the specifics of the argument but suffice it to say that all the major positions are covered in good detail. Highly recommended.

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