

There are many questions concerning persons. One popular question is ‘what is it to be a person?’ Answers include: a body, a brain, something with my shared goals. The philosophical problem of personal identity is different. It is characterized as follows:

Problem of Personal Identity =_{Def.} Under what conditions is it the case that a person A at time t_1 is the same person B at some later time t_2 ?

Another way of framing this problem is as follows:

Problem of Personal Identity Persistence =_{Def.} What conditions allow for a person to remain (to persist) one and the same person through time?¹

This problem is a general characterization of more concrete questions (1)–(4). First, an illustration.

Hypothetical Scenario #1: Person A walk’s into a machine, it disassembles A’s body, then, later B is assembled in the same way as A, using the same material.

- (1) Under what conditions is it a good idea for A to use a transporter machine (a machine that disassembles A’s parts and then reassembles them as B)?
- (2) Under what conditions is it the case that A=B when A steps into a transporter machine, is disassembled, then reassembled as B? Is it A if there is a body part missing? Is it A if there is mild memory loss? What happens if there is more than one reassembled individual, e.g. B and C. Is it A if there is a long period of time? Is it A if A is not disassembled?

Hypothetical Scenario #2: Person A is going to distribute A’s money to A’s childhood friend B. However, A has not seen B in a long time, and it is known that B’s DNA matches a number of other individuals.

- (3) If A knows person B at t_1 , and is presented with a number of relevantly similar persons C, D, E, F, G, ... Z at subsequent times t_2 , t_3 , t_4 , etc. by what criteria would A determine which one is B? Physical, spiritual, psychological, other? That is, how would A know that B=C or B=D.
- (4) If A decides that E at t_2 is the same person as B at t_1 . What determines whether or not A has chosen correctly?

The goal of a theory of personal identity is to fill in the blanks:

If A is a person at t_1 and B is a person at t_2 , then B is the same person as A if and only if _____.

¹ Your book spends a lot of time clarifying the exact nature of this problem of personal identity. We will not focus on the best way to clarify the problem.