

## **\*THE CRITERION OF PERSONAL IDENTITY - MUST IT BE PHYSICAL ?**

What is the problem about personal identity? Normally there is no problem in identifying a person to be my friend, my brother, father or uncle as the case may be. But how do I know that the person in front of me is an old friend of mine, that he is the same person with whom I used to play football during my school days. Normally again there should be no problem. He has the same physical features. I may say, and the same mental make-up too. Same or similar? Has there been absolutely no change in his physical features and even in the mental make-up? This is impossible! But then how do I know that he is the same person? For all that I know, he may be a similar person, a person whose psycho-physical make-up is quite similar to that of my old friend. Moreover, there are cases in which the physical features and mental make-up of a person are very much changed, having undergone a radical transformation in important respects, because of which it may almost be impossible to identify the person to be the same as one's old acquaintance. And yet, he is the same person, is n't he? But how do I discover it? How do I come to know that he is the same person as my old friend although his physical and mental features have undergone radical transformation in many important respects? The question is about the criterion of personal identity. Normally again there is no difficulty so long as there are photographs of my friend showing the gradual changes in his physical features and there is some body closely associated with him who has taken note of gradual changes occurring in his mental make-up. And even if my friend shows sudden signs of absolute mental derangement there is no difficulty in identifying him to be the same person so long as there is a physical continuity between his earlier and later state. A murderer who has undergone radical change both in his physical as well as mental make-up after committing the murder is identified to be the same person liable to the same charges even when a number of years might have elapsed only on this ground of bodily continuity. Bodily continuity, therefore, is the criterion of personal identity in such cases. But what if the body is destroyed?

Can we significantly talk of a person surviving the destruction of his body or appearing in another body after an interval? If so, then without bodily identity or continuity one can be identified to be the same person as before. But the question in that case would be, what would serve as a criterion of personal identity in the absence of bodily identity or continuity? Can memory or continuity of character do the job in the absence of physical continuity? Survival of the destruction of body and reincarnation in another body can not make sense if physical identity or continuity is a necessary criterion of personal identity.

But is it a necessary criterion? That it is not necessary should be evident from the following imaginary example. Supposing that my friend, Rama, vanishes into the air without a trace before my very eyes, as if by magic, and after some time re-appears before me, shall we call him an exactly similar but not the same person only because there is lack of spatio temporal continuity and consequently of bodily identity? I think not. Will Rama himself appreciate my taking this course or even understand why I behave like this? The person who returns after the interval behaves exactly as my friend Rama used to behave, he remembers doing everything that Rama did, he knows those very facts about me that Rama knew, and his body is exactly as my friend's used to be. Are these not sufficient to let me speak of him as being identical with Rama? I felt sorry when I saw Rama vanish without a trace and this surely should be the occasion for me to rejoice at his return. It is not that I have got somebody exactly like him before me after the interval, for this is not how we are likely to assess an event like this if it occurred. Everyone, it seems, will under such circumstances be inclined to say that Rama had vanished miraculously, but has come back unharmed. Here at least is a case, imaginary of course, where we should be inclined to base our judgement of personal identity only on memory, continuity of character, etc. not on bodily identity. What if the person re-appearing is not at all like Rama in his physical appearance? Shall we be inclined to accept him as the same person if he displays a continuity of character and an ostensibly veridical memory of Rama's past? No doubt it would be much more difficult for us to get us to the idea that the person in question is Rama; we may find ourselves completely bewildered for a while; but if the person

in question (let us call him  $R_1$ ) continues to display the psychological characteristics of Rama without fail; we should be ultimately persuaded to accept him as the same person though in a different body. We may say that Rama is back in a different body. This example is significant in pointing out that bodily identity or continuity is not necessary for personal identity in as much as it is not inconceivable that we may identify persons on the basis of veridical memory and continuity of character alone.

But the above example may be made more complicated by imagining the possibility of the disappearance of Rama being followed by the simultaneous appearance of two persons.  $R_1$  and  $R_2$  displaying the psychological characteristics of Rama in an exactly similar manner. Rama vanishes at time  $t_1$ , and at time  $t_2$  both  $R_1$  and  $R_2$  appear and claim to remember doing everything that Rama did and display the characteristics peculiar to Rama. What shall we say under such circumstances? We cannot say that Rama has returned to us in two different bodies, nor is there any criterion available to us by means of which we may decide that one of the persons appearing before us is identical with Rama and the other is not. It is certain that we should not know at first what to say, for the phenomenon in question is unusually bewildering. But if the phenomenon persists, then we shall have to adopt some linguistic convention which may appear convenient under the circumstances. We may perhaps find it convenient to say that  $R_1$  and  $R_2$  are exactly similar to Rama but that neither of them is numerically identical with him. Under the present circumstances, personal identity cannot be based on memory and continuity of character alone.

Does the above example invalidate our claim that in certain cases at least memory (and continuity of character) may be sufficient without bodily identity or continuity for the purpose of personal identity? I think not. For there are very good reasons to think that memory and continuity of character would suffice to identify a person without bodily identity or continuity in cases like the less complicated one where the disappearance of a person is followed by the appearance of a single individual claiming to remember doing the past acts of the person who has disappeared. I do not think that we can be logically coerced to admit that if we

cannot speak of numerical identity in terms of memory alone in one case, then we cannot speak of identity in terms of memory in some other case. The two imaginary cases mentioned above are different at least to the extent that whereas the disappearance of Rama is followed in one case by a reduplication of his personality, there occurs no such reduplication in the other. It is no wonder, then, that this important difference between the two cases should make our approach to them regarding personal identity quite different too. And if we can point to a single case, imaginary or otherwise, where we are likely to talk of identity in terms of memory (or continuity of character) alone in the absence of bodily continuity, then there should be no reason why we may not speak of identity in cases of reincarnation and disembodied existence after the destruction of the body. But how, it may be asked, does the construction of an imaginary case as mentioned above help us at all? May it not be contended that in ordinary circumstances we usually depend on bodily continuity as the criterion of personal identity and that in extraordinary circumstances, as stated above we just don't know what to say? And as we don't know what to say in those extraordinary circumstances, so also we don't know what to say in cases of disembodied existence and reincarnation where memory alone may serve as the possible criterion of personal identity. It is a matter of forming new rules and of making new decisions, if and when such circumstances do in fact arise. Now I am inclined to agree with the above contention on the whole, but I think that certain further points should be made in this connection. Although the above contention of the opponent may be valid, this should not be taken to have provided him with any a priori ground for claiming that personal identity just cannot make any sense without bodily identity in cases of disembodied survival and reincarnation, for what is contended by him is not that personal identity makes no sense without bodily identity but that we do not know what to say in such cases. There is a further point to be noted in this connection. We are, it is urged, to take decisions and to make new rules if and when such occasions do in fact arise. But even if this may be true, can we not possibly conceive what decisions we are likely to take if such occasions arise? If we can imagine these decisions, and if some of

the decisions imagined happen to be favourable to making memory without bodily identity the criterion of personal identity, then may we not feel justified in asserting that bodily identity or continuity is not a necessary criterion after all? The imaginary case constructed by us serves us well in being less complicated than the cases of disembodied existence and reincarnation and in making us visualize the circumstances in which we are very likely to admit personal identity on the basis of memory. Once it becomes clear to us that there may be circumstances when we are likely to base our judgment of identity on memory alone, the case for doing the same in connection with reincarnation and disembodied existence may not appear so preposterous after all. And this is why I think that the imaginary case constructed by me is not altogether pointless.

I must next consider the criteria which we may possibly adopt for the identification of the same person in cases of survival and rebirth. In the case of survival, the disembodied mind in question may be regarded as the same individual if (i) there is veridical memory of many of his past events and if there is capacity under certain circumstances to recollect those he is not actually recollecting at present, and also if (ii) the dispositions and character of the disembodied mind are continuous with those of the embodied one. The point concerning the continuity of dispositions and character is no doubt an important one, for if the disembodied life is altogether discontinuous with the embodied one, there could be a strong inclination to say that the disembodied mind in question is not the same as the embodied one. But it should be noted at the same time that if the memory claims in the disembodied state should turn out to be veridical then some degree of discontinuity may easily be allowed. The most important of all, therefore, seems to be memory, both in its dispositional as well as its occurrent sense. Let us imagine the following. In the disembodied state just after my death (i.e. the destruction of my body), I become immediately aware of a continuity of character and dispositions. This by itself should make me feel fairly certain that I have survived death. I look at my body lying there, and recognize my relatives standing beside my body although I am unable to communicate with them. Moreover, I recollect how much I used to love my body. How much I used to care for it, and

I now feel sorry, perhaps, to see that it is going to be burnt I also recollect that I had made some provisions for my family before my death, and am glad to see that my family has benefited from it. Now these and similar experiences after death should give me the conviction that I have survived death, that I who was so and so—a teacher of philosophy, a father of four children and so on—am now experiencing such and such things after the destruction of my body. And this I am able to ascertain through the continuity of character and dispositions to an extent, but primarily through my memory. Memory may not explain or produce self identity, but it at least discovers it. Even my knowledge that my present character and dispositions are continuous with my past character and dispositions is dependent on my memory. Memory, therefore, seems to be the most important and the primary criterion for the discovery of self-identity.

But how can we conceive of an independent check of the memory claim in the disembodied state? And if we cannot conceive of any such check, how can we avoid the possibility of being misled by delusive memory? It seems that some such check is not impossible in the disembodied state. First of all, one's memory about certain things may be checked by the same person's memory about certain other things. This is not an independent check, of course, but it may not be entirely useless. If two of my memories conflict with each other, it may lead me to investigate which one of these two is veridical and which one is not. Then I may perhaps seek the help of observation; as for example I may remember that in my embodied state I kept some valuable treasure hidden at a particular place, and I may verify this memory-claim by visiting the place in question. I may engage myself in some such verification procedure in the disembodied state, and I don't think that I should be very unreasonable if I become convinced through some such verification. Moreover, if the soul in the disembodied state may not be altogether solitary but may, on the contrary, be causally related to other souls, something like a 'public' check of one's memory-claim should be possible in the disembodied state. One's memory may be checked through other's memory and observation. The public check and verification in the disembodied state would no doubt be very much different from what we usually understand

them to be. The public as we know it consists of embodied individuals whereas the public in the disembodied state would be constituted of disembodied souls only. In the embodied state, moreover, perception is dependent on and is conducted through sense organs, whereas in the disembodied state it has to be conducted without sense organs. It is possible that each and every disembodied soul may be deluded both as regards his memory as well as perception, and yet they may have an elaborate system of checking the memories against each other and against perception. If this be a fact, then it is hard to see what independent means of detecting the mass hallucination in the disembodied state may possibly be adopted. Verification of a memory-claim in the disembodied state through the memories and perceptions of other souls cannot therefore have any logical certainty. Still, it seems that a disembodied mind may have some sort of practical certainty regarding his past life and personal continuity both through his memory which has been checked by his own perception and further memories, and through the perceptions and the memories of other members of the community.

All this is, however, fraught with certain grave difficulties which have been overlooked so far. First of all, prior to the consideration of the criterion of personal identity in the disembodied state we should be able to meet the objection that it may not, after all, be significant to talk of disembodied persons. "For", as Ayer points out, "here we have to find a criterion not only for our subject's being the same person as one who is physically identified, but for his being a person at all. We have to make sense of saying that some one exists without a body, before we can raise the question whether he is the same person as one who existed with a body. And for this, continuity of memory, though it may be necessary, will not be sufficient."<sup>1</sup> And I fail to see how one can overcome this difficulty. Soul-substance theory will not do, and a series of experience without a body cannot meaningfully be said to constitute a person. How in that case can one conceive of a person as distinguished from another in the disembodied state? By means of their mental qualities? But what in that case would distinguish two persons having the same mental qualities in the disembodied state? Assumption of soul-substance will not solve the problem,

it would rather multiply our difficulties; and there is no physical criterion to rely on. I therefore find this difficulty to be an insuperable one and fatal to any conception of disembodied existence.

There is the further objection that far from there being the possibility of a public check in the disembodied state, one would have no means of knowing, as Strawson has aptly pointed out, other disembodied persons if such persons were existing so that the disembodied existence is bound to be a solitary one. The question of verification by observation, moreover, seems not only fantastic but losing all significance when we take into consideration the fact that all such observations etc. are to be carried on not only without a body but amidst a disembodied community. We have also to make sense of saying that the disembodied person visits the place where he had hidden his treasure, and 'visiting' here is to be done without a body. How then is this visiting to be conceived? All such descriptions of the disembodied spirit visiting their home etc. are apparently significant only because of an implicit reference to body throughout such description. And that is why, because of this fact, that a reference to body cannot be omitted altogether. In Indian thought we find the assumption of *sūksma sariara* or subtle body which is conceived to be moving from one place to another after the destruction of the *sthūla sarira* or gross body. The assumption of a *sūksma sarira* or subtle body inside the gross body is of course not without difficulties of its own. But this shows the awareness on the part of Indian thinkers that a reference to some sort of body or the other is a necessary condition for the meaningful employment of language of seeing, hearing, moving etc. in a description of the life after death. Pure spirit, therefore, according to Indian thought, cannot move, see, hear, touch, feel pain or pleasure. Geach seems to be making a salient point when he says that "the exercise of one concept is intertwined with the exercise of others, as with a spider's web, some connections may be broken with impunity; but if you break enough the whole web collapses—the concept becomes unusable. Just such a collapse happens, I believe, when we try to think of seeing, hearing, pain, emotion etc. going on independently of a body."<sup>2</sup> The hypothesis of disembodied existence is thus



fraught with grave difficulties, and the problem of personal identity in the disembodied state cannot therefore be solved successfully by mere reference to memory and continuity of character.

The question of reincarnation, however, is a more straightforward one. When we come to the question of the determination of personal identity in the case of reincarnation, we find that here also we have to fall back upon memory both in its occurrent and dispositional sense. Here again the question of the discrimination between the veridical and delusive memory seems to be of paramount importance, and here once more the possibility of having the public check comes to our rescue. But before discussing the nature of the certainty, if any, which we may have through such checks, it may not be altogether worthless to point out that there are good reasons for believing the memory claims that are made with sincerity and conviction to be more often veridical than not. And I fail to see why this should not be true also of those few memory-claims of earlier lives that are made with sincerity and conviction. I do not, of course, mean to say that instances of sincere and confident and yet delusive memory claims actually do not occur, for such instances can easily be cited, but what I want to say is that the memory-claims, if made with sincerity and conviction, are generally true.

But in any case, I must admit, we cannot get rid of the necessity of checking the ostensible memories of past lives. No such check, however, can give us logical certainty, even if we may be practically certain that the person in question is really a reincarnation of some other person of the past. The crucial points to be noted here are the following : ( i ) The person concerned should be able to give us some important information about the dead person whose reincarnation he is supposed to be. ( ii ) He must not have obtained this information through the normal sources. ( iii ) He also must not have obtained them through paranormal powers like retrocognitive clairvoyance. Now it is indeed almost impossible to distinguish between veridical memory and retrocognitive clairvoyance. It is to be noted, therefore, that even if the memory claim is verified to be true in respect of the objective facts, this is no logical proof that the person in question is really identical with the person whose life history he seems to remember correctly. For

it may be that the person in question has got this information not through memory but through retrocognitive clairvoyance. Memory-claims, therefore, even if verified to be true in respect of the objective facts, cannot establish the personal identity of the person in question beyond doubt, i. e. cannot establish beyond doubt that the person in question is a reincarnation of the dead person whose life-history he seems to remember correctly. But at the same time we must take into consideration the following points. It is desirable that we should eschew the irrational tendency of trying, regardless of implausibilities, to explain all the alleged cases of memories of past lives in terms of retrocognitive clairvoyance. We must not forget that the explanation in terms of paranormal retrocognition "requires us to postulate" in certain cases "a capacity for retrocognitive clairvoyance far exceeding in scope any for the reality of which experimental evidence exists"<sup>3</sup> Moreover, we must make it a point that any inveterate aversion that we may have against the reincarnation hypothesis, because our religion perhaps prohibits us to believe in some such theory, or because of some such sentimental reasons, should not be allowed to goad us to reject the reincarnation interpretation quite regardless of its being in some case the least implausible interpretation of all. That such irrational tendencies have gained supremacy in the interpretation of certain cases cannot be denied<sup>4</sup>. Not only that, even in the imaginary case constructed by us where the disappearance of Rama is followed by the appearance of R<sub>1</sub> claiming to remember doing what Rama alone did, we may say that R<sub>1</sub> has a retrocognitive clairvoyance of what Rama did. But if we go on explaining most of the ostensible memories as cases of paranormal retrocognition whenever we feel inclined to do so, no matter how far fetched the explanation may appear to be, then we shall be going too far towards irrationalism. It is no doubt true that we have no established convention regarding the veridical ostensible memory-claims of past lives, and that therefore it is matter for decision whether the person making these memory-claims should be regarded as being numerically identical with another person of the past or not. But I should think of this lack of convention as being due more to the scarcity of such phenomena (i. e. phenomena of veridical ostensible memory-

claims concerning past lives) rather than to any absurdity inherent in adopting such memory-claims as the criterion for the determination of the numerical identity of a living person with another person of the past. We may therefore adopt such memory-claims as the criterion for determining personal identity in the case of reincarnation and say that a person is numerically identical with another person of the past if the following conditions are fulfilled.

- (1) The person in question claims to remember doing what the dead person did and participating in the events that happened to the dead man.
- (2) These memory claims are veridical, i. e. they correspond to known facts.
- (3) The ostensible memories are genuine memories i. e., the person in question is known to have had no opportunity to acquire this information through some other source.

If the above conditions are fulfilled, we shall call the person in question a reincarnation of the dead person whose life-history he claims to remember as being his own.

In case of one who, on the other hand, does not actually recollect any such past life, the assertion that he is the same person as some dead individual can be based only on the supposition that under certain appropriate circumstances he is capable of actually remembering his past history which includes the history of the dead individual. Personal identity under such circumstances is based on memory in its dispositional sense alone. But here the most perplexing problem is the clarification of the meanings of 'capable' and 'appropriate circumstances.' What would the 'appropriate circumstances' be like so as to enable me to recollect my past life? What are we to mean by 'capacity to remember'? If under normal circumstances one does not seem to have such capacity, shall we or shall we not say that he is devoid of this capacity? Under what circumstances shall we be prepared to abandon our claim that every one has got the capacity to recollect their past lives? If we are not prepared to give it up under any circumstance whatsoever, then our claim, it may be urged, must be vacuous. Now I must admit that this is a serious problem. But I can only point out that

the claim concerning the capacity for remembering the life—history under appropriate circumstances need not be falsifiable, for an unfalsifiable statement is not necessarily vacuous or meaningless. I do not think that one is committed to set a limit at a point in time to the capacity of a human mind to remember its past life. The notion of personal identity in the case of those who do not actually remember their past may on this view be based on the idea that such persons could remember the incidents of their past life under certain appropriate circumstances. A person may be supposed to recollect his past sometimes through the hypnotic trance or the yogic exercises, but to fix any such limit to his capacity to remember the past by specifying a condition like yoga or hypnosis seems to me to be both arbitrary as well as unnecessary. It should, I think, be alright if one is able to specify certain possible circumstances under which a person may be supposed to actually recollect his past history, and in view of his ability to specify such conditions I do not think that his statement concerning the capacity to remember the past under appropriate circumstances should be condemned as vacuous. The actual occurrence of memory may vary from one individual to another, so that if one may be able to remember his past life through hypnotic trance another may not. In any case, the assertion that Rama is a reincarnation is intelligible on the supposition that, although he has not as yet done so, he could, in some circumstances or the other recollect as his own the history of some other past individual. And his being a reincarnation consists only in this without any further implication of transmigration of a soul or spirit from one body to the other. — Two points however, deserve to be noted here. Though not meaningless, such statement of identification of a person as a dead person of the past on the basis of memory in its dispositional sense is metaphysical and thus devoid of empirical content. It is compatible with any known fact whatsoever; no particular experience can falsify it. Secondly, memory serves here as a criterion only in an extraordinary sense and only because there is already a physical basis for identification.

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NOTES

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In preparing this paper I have utilised some of the materials of my paper "Survival, Reincarnation, and the problem of personal Identity" originally published in *Journal of Philosophical Association*, 1968 and subsequently reprinted in *Philosophical Dimension of Parapsychology* (U. S. A., 1976), although it may also be pointed out that the present paper makes a significant departure from my earlier position.

1. *The Problem of knowledge* (Penguin Books, 1962) p. 195
2. P. T. Geach, *Mental Acts : Their content and their objects*.
3. C. J. Ducases : *The Belief in a Life after Death* (U. S. A. 1961), p. 243
4. Cf. *Ibid.*, Chapter XXV, The case of "The Search for Eriday Murphy".

