

## INDETERMINATENESS OF THE CONCEPT OF A PERSON

The objective of this paper is to argue for the position that the concept of a person is indeterminate and loose. I propose first to show the inadequacy of the dualistic position of Cartesian variety and argue in favour of the Strawsonian analysis of the concept of a person. In the second part, I discuss some weaknesses in this analysis and try to show that while Strawsonian analysis gives us the necessary condition of being a person, it fails to provide a sufficient condition of the same. On the basis of observations regarding what constitutes sufficient condition of something being a person, I put forward the proposal that the concept of a person is indeterminate.

### I

In one of his recent works, Richard Swinburne observes : "... it is coherent to suppose that a person could continue to exist with an entirely new body or no body at all."<sup>1</sup>

This conclusion brings into focus the entire controversy regarding the concept of a person and that of personal identity. Much of the discussion of the concept of a person in contemporary philosophy is a discussion of the problem of personal identity, that is to say, of the problem of specifying necessary and sufficient condition of a person at time  $t_2$  being the same as a person at  $t_1$ . This is not surprising, since answers to the two questions go hand in hand. The question of the criterion of personal identity cannot be discussed without taking into account what sort of being counts as a person and what is regarded as a necessary and sufficient condition of personal identity also provides an answer to what counts as a person.

Two claims are made in the lines quoted above, (1) a person can exist in a disembodied state and (2) a person can have two numerically

**RECEIVED : 24/04/90**

different bodies at two different points of time. The second point concerns the question of criterion of personal identity and we would not discuss it here. The first claim can be interpreted in two ways: (i) a person having once embodied existence can continue to exist in a disembodied state or (ii) a person can remain disembodied throughout the period of his/her existence. Strawson accepts the first possibility, namely, that the concept of pure individual consciousness might have a "logically secondary existence"<sup>2</sup> though it cannot exist as a primary concept. On the dualistic definition a disembodied or pure consciousness is a person in a full-blooded sense. Swinburne says, "... all that a person needs to be a person are certain mental capacities - for having conscious experience (e.g. thoughts or sensations) and performing intentional actions."<sup>3</sup> Thus, anything that has the required capacities is entitled to be called a person, it being immaterial whether this something is a human being or some other kind of being or a disembodied entity. Having these capacities is both necessary and sufficient condition of being a person. The influence of Descartes here is quite obvious.<sup>4</sup> For dualists like Swinburne a person is essentially a soul and what entitles some being to be a person is capacity for thought and intentional action. The two capacities are certainly very important for an adequate analysis of the concept of a person. Another thing which often figures in definitions of 'person' is self-consciousness and awareness of one's identity over a period of time. Thus, Locke defines 'person' as "... a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as self, the same thinking thing in different times and places."<sup>5</sup>

Cartesian dualism allows both for the possibility of a person having different bodies at different times and being a disembodied being. But equating person with an incorporeal thinking substance or a soul fails to provide an adequate analysis of the concept of a person. Much has been written on the difficulties of mind-body dualism of this kind. Two points in this context seem the most important. One, if a person is regarded as an incorporeal substance, no account can be given of how a person is to be identified, (one cannot observe the soul of another).<sup>6</sup> Two, no criterion of reidentification of such substance can be provided. It may be argued that in one's own case, one has direct knowledge of one's identity over a period of time. This knowledge, however, would have to be restricted to those past moments of which one has personal memories. But even here, as Kant has pointed out, there is

no contradiction in the supposition that not one but many successive souls are the subjects of different experiences at different times and each soul conveys all its knowledge to its successor.

Dualists regard it as something obviously true that thoughts and feelings, that is to say, states of consciousness cannot be ascribed to corporeal substances but only to thinking substances. However, there does not seem any contradiction in the supposition that something may be both extended and have thoughts. As a matter of fact, if we reflect over our ways of talking about human beings, this is precisely what we do, namely, ascribe both corporeal characteristics and mental states or states of consciousness to the same embodied being. Strawson's analysis of the concept of a person is based on this basic insight.

## II

Strawson rejects both Cartesian dualism and no-ownership theories and defines 'person' as a kind of subject to which both predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics and those ascribing states of consciousness can be applied. The concept of a person is of a kind of individual to which both M and P - predicates can be ascribed. On Strawson's view, two things emerge clearly from the way person words are used ordinarily. One, states of consciousness are ascribed to something and two, they are ascribed to the very same thing to which corporeal characteristics are ascribed. This does appear to be the case. We never say, "There is a pain" but that "I have a pain", or "He is in pain" or "She was in pain". Similarly we not only ascribe thoughts, feelings and emotions to persons, we also ascribe height, weight, colour etc., to them.

Two important points emerge from Strawson's discussion : i) a person is a subject and ii) a subject to which both M and P-predicates are ascribable. The first goes against no-ownership theories. Such a theory, Strawson says, cannot state the relationship between a person's state of consciousness and his body consistently. The statement of this relationship is supposed to be synthetic and significant but on this theory it becomes analytic and trivial. The statement that a person's states or consciousness are causally dependent upon his body is meant to be a significant one. The no-ownership theorists, then, must have the concept of a subject of states of consciousness different from that of the body;

otherwise, the statement in question is reduced to a trivial one.

The no-ownership theorist presupposes correlations between some states of consciousness and certain body and these correlations must be empirically discoverable. The body is independently identifiable but states of consciousness can be identified only by reference to the person whose states they are. How can, then, these correlations be discovered empirically? Further, correlations between a person P's body and states of consciousness can be established only after these states have been identified as belonging to P. A way to avoid this circularity has been suggested by Ayer.<sup>7</sup> He says that the general statement 'Every experience is causally dependent upon a body' is analytic, whereas the more specific statements which describe relationships between states of consciousness and bodily conditions are empirical. This suggestion, however, does not remove the difficulty. From the general statement merely this follows that every state of consciousness is causally dependent upon some body but which states depend upon which body is a further question which remains unanswered by the no-ownership theorist.

Against the dualism of two kinds of substances, Strawson puts forward a dualism of two kinds of predicates. The important point, however, is that both these can be ascribed to some subjects which person words refer to. For a theory of this kind, it is important to distinguish clearly between the two kinds of predicates.

### III

Does the concept of a being to which both M and P - predicates are ascribable give us the concept of a person? Is it necessary for something to be a person that both kinds of predicates be ascribable to it? Let us first take up the question of ascription of M-predicates. If some M - predicates must be ascribable to a person, then no disembodied soul or pure ego can be a person.

A disembodied soul or ego can be said to be a person only if the following are granted :-

- 1) Ascribability of only P-predicates matters for personhood, not of M-predicates.
- 2) Ascription of P-predicates to a disembodied soul or pure ego is

intelligible.

The first admission goes against Strawsonian criticism of Cartesian dualism and the very spirit of his analysis of the concept of a person. A disembodied soul cannot be regarded as a person even in a logically secondary sense, because it is impossible to provide a principle of individuation for it. Every psychological characteristic can have more than one instance, i.e. can be possessed by more than one person. Even this is logically possible that memories of two persons may be exactly alike. Psychological characteristics, thus, cannot enable us to uniquely identify one ego or soul from another. Therefore, it is not possible to give a principle of individuation purely in terms of psychological characteristics of an entity.

Nor can the previous association of a soul or a group of psychological characteristics with a body can be of help in this context. Such association does not leave a mark on the soul or one such group such that in the disembodied state one soul or one such group can be differentiated from another on its basis. The possibility of association with a certain body in the future also does not help. It is possible that any soul or any group of psychological characteristics may in future be associated with any body. Even if it is granted that certain psychological characteristics can be associated only with a certain type of body, it remains possible that a soul or a group of psychological characteristics may in the future be associated with any one of a certain type of bodies.

Many philosophers have maintained that a disembodied soul can continue to have not only thoughts and memories but also sensuous experiences. As far as perceptual experiences are concerned, it is far from clear that they can occur without there being any physical body. Even in the case of thinking and memory, it is not obvious that they can occur in the absence of a body. We must distinguish between two positions here : i) that an experience can occur without being correlated with the part of the body with which it is actually correlated. For example, seeing may not be dependent upon eyes as it actually is but on some other part of the body, and ii) that an experience can occur in the absence of a body. The first can be accepted since it is a contingent matter that one kind of experience is causally dependent upon a certain part of the body and could be so dependent upon some other part. But from

this we cannot jump to the conclusion that this experience, say seeing, can occur in the absence of the body. While a proposition asserting causal dependence of (or correlation between) certain kinds of experiences (states of consciousness) and certain parts of a body is contingent, the same cannot be said about the proposition 'Every experience is causally dependent upon (or correlated with) some body (or part of a body).' It does not seem possible to define "experience" in such a way that such causal dependence upon or correlation with a body does not figure in it.

From what has been said above, it follows that a subject to which no M - predicates are ascribable cannot be said to be a person. A question, however, still remains to be answered. Does the concept of a person allow ascribability of any M - predicates or only of some specific M - predicates? For example, can a non-living thing be regarded as a person, if some P - predicates are ascribable to it? Or can artifacts like robots be called persons if their behaviour suggests that P - predicates can be ascribed to them?

It seems that the concept of a person does require that some M - predicates be ascribable to a subject so regarded. One may add that it also requires that certain specific kind of M - predicates be ascribable to it. For example, it may be said that only a living being can qualify for personhood. A robot or a non-living thing would then not qualify to be a person. It is, however, not something straightforwardly clear. Suppose there is a robot capable of complex behaviour similar to the behaviour of human persons. Is this robot a person? Perhaps in such a case it would be incorrect to regard this robot as a non-living object. It follows that having a specific physical form (say like that of human beings) is not a necessary condition of being a person but the subject in question must be a living being. The concept of a person, thus, does not require that certain M - predicates be ascribable to a subject but only that any of those types of M - predicates, the possession of which makes the subject a living being.

Let us now consider the ascription of P - predicates. Some predicates like 'is smiling' or 'is walking' do not clearly fall either into the class of M - predicates or P - predicates; they rather seem to be a complex of both kinds of predicates. P - predicates, Strawson says, are those which imply possession of consciousness by that to which they

are ascribed. Their peculiarity consists in the fact that while M-predicates can be "properly applied" to both material objects and persons, P-predicates can not be ascribed to material objects. Strawson writes, "We would not dream of applying predicates ascribing states of consciousness"<sup>8</sup> to material objects. It is not clear, however, why ascription of P-predicates to material objects is improper. The impropriety does not seem to consist in the fact that such ascriptions are always false, since "The idea of a predicate is correlated with that of a range of distinguishable individuals of which the predicate can be significantly though not necessarily truly affirmed."<sup>9</sup>

P-predicates, then, cannot be significantly ascribed to material bodies in Strawson's view. It is, however, far from clear why such ascription does not make sense. It is not the case that certain M-predicates can only be ascribed to persons, nor that P-predicates are ascribable to those individuals alone to which certain M-predicates are ascribable. Since M-predicates are properly applied to both persons and material objects, it follows that any M-predicate can be significantly ascribed to a person, whether such ascription is true or false is another matter. In case of ascription of P-predicates to material objects, the ascriptions being said to be not merely false but devoid of significance.

One way to explain this point is to say that ascription of P-predicates to material objects commits a category mistake. This can be maintained only when a distinction between material bodies and persons is already drawn and available independently of the distinction between the two kinds of predicates. Since the distinction between these two kinds of individuals is itself drawn on the basis of ascribability of different types of predicates, it is not, then, open to Strawson to base the distinction between M and P-predicates on the distinction between material objects and persons. When Strawson says that ascription of P-predicates to material objects does not make sense, he is presupposing a categorical distinction between two kinds of individuals.

Another way to understand Strawson's position would be to maintain that ascription of P-predicates to material bodies is not significant since any subject to which P-predicates can be ascribed is not a mere material body. Then, ascribability of P-predicates to material bodies would be ruled out by way of definition. Again, it would be necessary to provide distinction between M and P-predicates without

bringing in the distinction between material bodies and persons. The distinction between the two kinds of predicates could be proved if 'consciousness' and 'possession of consciousness' can be explained without reference to persons and perhaps it is possible to do so on the basis of behavioural criteria.

Yet another difficulty arises in this context. Some predicates which when applied to persons, fall into the category of P - predicates are also applicable to material bodies. For example 'adds', 'calculates', 'remembers' are correctly used, in the case of computers. Conversely, a predicate like 'is running', when ascribed to a person, means ascription of P - predicate but when ascribed to a river or stream, is treated as M - predicate. One may here say that such cases involve analogy. For some of these predicates their standard use may be regarded as the one in case of material bodies and the other becomes a case of analogy. For others (like 'remembers') their standard use becomes the one in the case of persons and their ascription to computers a case of analogy. One would have to say then that 'remembers' does not mean the same in the two cases of ascription; and cannot be a P - predicate when ascribed to a computer, since a computer cannot be thought of as possessing consciousness.

But how do we arrive at this conclusion? For Strawson behavioural criteria are logically adequate for ascription of P - predicates to others, while in one's own case such ascription does not depend on behavioural criteria. So possession of consciousness by computers can be denied on the ground of such criteria. The kind of computers we have at present do not engender serious problem. Suppose a computer or a robot is developed which exhibits behaviour associated with some P - predicates and even has some language (though different from the languages used by human persons) to communicate with others, would we be prepared to regard such a computer or robot as a person? Ordinarily, we hesitate in categorising anything non-living as a person. In case of living beings we are less reluctant to ascribe states of consciousness to beings different from humans. If we come across a monkey or a chimp or some other animal for instance, whose behaviour is remarkably similar to humans we would not hesitate in ascribing appropriate P - predicates to it. One may at this juncture say that a robot (or computer) cannot be called a person since it is not a living being. This position can be entertained only if 'being a living being' constitutes a

necessary condition of 'being a person'. However, the question whether 'calculates' and 'remembers' in the case of a robot are to be treated as P-predicates seems to depend on a prior decision whether a robot is a person or not. In the Strawsonian scheme, ascription of P-predicates would have to be based on behavioural criteria alone. Therefore, if it becomes possible to have robots which are capable of highly complex behaviour of the type associated with P-predicates in the case of human beings, we will have to admit that states of consciousness can be ascribed to these. These robots may still not be regarded as persons because they are not living beings. This suggests the possibility of conscious but non-living individuals which are neither material bodies nor persons., (such beings may on the contrary cease to be treated as non-living in the light of their behaviour). A second possibility is of living beings who do not fall into either category. That such beings are not merely a hypothetical possibility but actually exist would emerge in the following passages.

Let us return to our original question. Does the concept of a subject to which both M and P predicates are ascribable, give us the concept of a person? The answer is "NO". The ascribability of both kinds of predicates constitutes a necessary but not a sufficient condition of being a person. The concept of a being to whom both M and P-predicates can be ascribed gives the concept of a sentient being but not of a person. On this definition, any being to whom some states of consciousness can be ascribed would qualify as a person. A monkey or a chimp seems to satisfy this requirement. In most of the contemporary discussions of 'person' the evolution of biological species seems to have been ignored. This presents a misleading picture as if all individuals can be neatly divided into two classes - material bodies and persons. But there is no sharp dividing line between the two classes, rather there is a whole class of beings, namely animals, that fall in between.

Arguing for the primitiveness of the concept of a person, Ishiguro<sup>10</sup> says that the primitiveness of a concept is not affected by the fact that the extension of that concept is a proper subset of the extension of another concept. It is quite true that the mere fact that the individuals qualifying as persons also fall under the extension of another concept would not pose a problem. The problem here, however, is that the primitive concept of a subject to which both M and P predicates are ascribable is not that of a person. One requirement for a sortal concept is that it enables us to identify certain things as things of that sort. But

to pick out an entity as the subject of both M and P predicates is not to pick it out as a person. This way of defining 'person' leaves the concept undetermined. It seems necessary, therefore, to further determine it by including certain types of P - predicates. Capacity for self-awareness, intentional actions and having second order desires etc. seem unavoidable for defining 'person'. It is also sometimes suggested that the capacity for using language is defined in a way such that ways of communication by animals do not come under it, is necessary for being a person.

It is by no means easy to clarify P - predicates that must figure in an analysis of the concept of a person. If we include certain predicates, the concept may become too narrow, whereas if we exclude certain other predicates the concept may become too wide. Take capacity for self-awareness or reflective thought. Suppose these two are included in the concept of a person, a very young baby would not qualify as a person. Killing such a baby, then, would not amount to killing a person and this seems far from obvious. Similarly, it may be asked whether a foetus, which is, say seven or eight months old, is a person or not. The looseness of the concept of a person comes into sharp focus when we discuss the question of abortion. Does abortion amount to murder of a person? If human foetus is a person right after conception, then yes. If conception is rejected as the beginning of a person, then when does one become a person? Does birth mark the beginning of a person? But, then the difference between a newly born baby and a developed foetus is so small as regards states of consciousness that making birth the dividing line seems absolutely arbitrary.

Similar difficulties arise in the case of individuals suffering from severe mental retardation. If we specify the P - predicates in such a way that such individuals are included in the class of persons, there is a danger that some other beings, which are generally not regarded as persons, would also get included. On the other hand, if we specify the P - predicates keeping in mind normal human persons, there is a danger that mentally retarded individuals would be excluded from the class of persons and this may lead to some unacceptable consequences. It follows that our concept of a person is not so tidy that its application in every case is clear. In some cases it has clear application, in others not. There may be cases where it is not clear whether the entity in question is to be regarded as a person or not.

On the dualistic conception, something is either a person or not a person. If X is a soul or has a soul, X is a person, otherwise not. The Strawsonian analysis of the concept of a person is correct as far as necessary condition of being a person is concerned. But when we consider what provides a sufficient condition of being a person, the concept of a person is found to be indeterminate. A corollary of the dualistic position that the concept of a person is determinate, is the view that the concept of personal identity is determinate. On this view the necessary and sufficient condition of personal identity is identity of the soul, continuity of character and memory is only evidence of such an identity. This view also faces serious difficulties which require detailed discussion.<sup>11</sup>

Department of Philosophy  
University of Delhi  
Delhi - 110007

VIBHA CHATURVEDI

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. R.Swinburne & S.Shoemaker, *Personal Identity*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1984, p-24.
2. P.F.Strawson, *Individuals*, Methuen, London, 1959, p.115.
3. Swinburne, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.
4. While discussing the nature of self, Descartes says that it is "... a substance whose entire essence or nature is only to think, and which in order to exist, has no need of a place nor depends upon any material thing. So that this "I", that is to say, the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body... and even if the body had never been, the soul would not fail to be everything that it is." - Discourse Concerning the Method" in *Rene Descartes : The Essential Writings*, ed. J.J.Blom, Harper & Row, 1977, p.135.
5. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A.D.Woozley, Collins, The Fontana Library, London and Glasgow, 1964, p.211.
6. P.F.Strawson emphasizes that one cannot identify other subjects of experiences if one identifies them only as subjects of experiences or as possessors of states of consciousness. *Individuals* p.100.
7. A.J.Ayer, *The Concept of A Person and Other Essays*, Macmillan, London, 1963.
8. Strawson, *op.cit.* p.104
9. *Ibid*, p.99 (footnote)
10. H.Ishiguro, 'The Primitiveness of the Concept of a Person', *Philosophical Subjects*, ed.Z.V.Straaten, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, p.64
11. The difficulties of such a position have been discussed in detail in my *The Problems of Personal Identity*, Ajanta Publications, Delhi, 1988.

# INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY

## Institutional Permanent Members

48. The Principal  
University College  
Thiruvananthapuram- 695 034  
(KERALA)

## Life Members (Individuals)

312. Swami Bodhatmananda  
Sri Ramakrishna Sevasrama  
Digboi - 786 171  
(ASSAM)

313. Mrs Anjana Neog  
C/o N.C. Phukan (Advocate)  
S.K. Bhuyan Road  
Dighi Pukhuri Par (East)  
Guwahati - 780 001  
(ASSAM)