

PERSONAL IDENTITY, REFERENCE AND SCEPTICISM

This essay can be divided into the following sections, viz.,

- I. Explanation of personal identity as a logical concept.
- II. Analysis of personal identity as a logical condition of reference of personal predicates.
- III. The proof of the logical impossibility of scepticism regarding personal identity.

The main aim of this paper is to establish that personal identity can be given a logical explanation, and to show that personal identity is a logical precondition of the possibility of our language and thought.

I

We appeal to the notion of personal identity when, for example, we say that a person X is the same man whom we had seen before and that he will continue to be so in future. We accept, though without sufficient argument, that a person remains identical in his life time in spite of the many changes that do occur to him. A person in his old age is not exactly what he was in his childhood and youth; there are specific changes which occur in every period of his physical growth. Despite this fact, the person remains identical throughout his life and is known as an individual with a definite proper name and with other family and social affiliations. In view of this the question arises: Is a person numerically identical in the different periods of his life? Or, is there just a resemblance among the states of existence of the person who is always changing? The latter part of the question obviously can easily be disposed of. The identity of a person X at times t_1 , t_2 , t_3 and so on is not a physical resemblance X_{t_1} , X_{t_2} , and X_{t_3} etc. In this continuous series, the conditioning time-factors divide a continuing existence into diverse moments which cannot easily be related. In our common experience we do not encounter such a bifurcated existence of a person. The identity of the person is not therefore a resemblance physical or otherwise among the diverse states of his existence which, though numerically diverse, are otherwise continuous.

The first half of the questions rather sets the problem in a proper perspective. We may say in answer to this question that a person remains numerically the same or identical in spite of the changes which occur to him both physically and mentally. The changes do not gainsay the fact that a numerically identical person alone becomes the subject of the changes. Besides, these changes themselves emphasise physical continuity which is the only empirical condition for all the changes to belong to the same person. As per the example given above, Xt_1 , Xt_2 and Xt_3 , though appearing dissimilar because of certain temporal conditions, are not really dissimilar, but are essentially identical, because the person X remains the constant factor in the continuous series.

Physical continuity of a person at different periods of time demands a clear analysis if our answer to the above question is to carry meaning. It cannot, however, claim to solve the problem of personal identity, though it may claim to provide some light on this problem. The bodily continuity of a person is at best a physical fact which cannot itself be a logical explanation of personal identity. The bodily changes, which occur from time to time, do affect the physical existence of the person, but are of no consequence as regards the logical identity of the person. If, for example, X loses a hand or foot in an accident, we do not thereafter say that X has become altogether a different person Y . That is, though in this case X has a slightly different appearance, that does not deny the fact that X is X and not Y . Therefore any explanation of personal identity by an appeal to the bodily continuity of a person does not go far and it is at best a description of how a person is identical rather than an explanation of why he is so. Of course, the physical continuity of a person is the limit of all logical explanation of personal identity, since, without there being a physical continuity, the person ceases to exist. But that does not itself guarantee that physical continuity is a logical criterion of a person's being identical.

Like physical continuity, psychological continuity also does not explain personal identity. By psychological continuity is meant the continuity in the different states of the mental life of a person. A person, it may be claimed, is identical because of the apparent unity in the series of mental states and this series

guarantees the sameness of the person. But any such appeal to continuity of mental states for explaining personal identity is bound to fail, because psychological continuity itself is explicable only on the presupposition that there is an identical person who has these changing states of mind. The series of similar mental states m_1 , m_2 , m_3 and so on do not themselves explain anything except the fact that there is an empirical law of continuity among these mental states. These states are bound into a memory-series which builds a unity of personal life. But this unity is conditioned on the memory-series and therefore cannot be mistaken for personal identity. If, for example, a person justifies his identity by appealing to the unity of his memory-acts, he can at best convince himself that he is the same person throughout, but such conviction will be subjective, since there are no objective criteria by which he can show that his memory-acts are justly recorded. Even if a person's memory is correct he can at best say that he remembers that he is the same person but he cannot establish why he is so. Besides, even if the memory of a person fails under circumstances he continues to be the same person, though he may fail to recognise that he is the same person. So it suffices to say that memory cannot guarantee the identity of a person¹; memory-acts are themselves dependent on personal identity for their unity.

Thus far it is clear that the identity of a person cannot be explained by any appeal to continuity both physical and mental. The continuity of either type provides, no doubt, certain empirically conditioned criteria for identification of a person, but it does not suffice to provide any logically guaranteed identifiability criteria. The identity of a person, therefore, ought to be grounded on logical conditions and not on empirical situations.

The only logical criterion that immediately makes itself conspicuous is the fact that the concept of person is itself, as P. F. Strawson² has rightly pointed out, a logically primitive concept and is prior to the concept of mind and of body. It is logically primitive in the sense that it is the ultimate limit of all our explanation of self-consciousness and of physical continuity as well, and stands as a unique category in our conceptual system. In this sense a person can be reduced neither to a series of mental states as Hume supposed nor to synthetic

unity of consciousness as Kant believed it to be. The concept of person being logically primitive is prior to the mental states as well as to the unity of consciousness itself. The logical primitiveness of the concept of person is uniquely represented in our language, and this language itself will be unintelligible if the identity of the person is not logically guaranteed. So from the logical primitiveness of the concept of person the identity of person follows as a logical necessity. This is a proof that establishes personal identity as a logical concept and as one which stands in need of logical explanation.

II

The logical necessity of personal identity can be established by proving it as a condition of the possibility of our personal language, i.e., the language in which we use personal predicates. The personal predicates like thoughts, feelings, intentions, actions and willing etc., as they stand in our language, have a characteristic grammar of their own and this grammar will not be intelligible if we do not accept personal identity as a logical condition of the use of such predicates. The reference of predicates to a person, for example, in the sentences such as 'X is hurt' and 'X is ill', itself requires that there is a person to whom these predicates are referred. Besides, the identity of the person becomes necessary in view of the fact that these predicates will fail to carry any meaning unless the person is identifiable. When, for example, we say 'X is ill' at t_1 and examine him at t_2 , we assume that X is the same person in these successive moments. Otherwise our talk of illness with reference to the person will not have any meaning. If the person, to whom these predicates are referred, were found to be not identical in the successive moments, we cannot ascribe any predicate to any individual.

Thus reference of personal predicates rests on two conditions: first, there must be a person who can be said to be the logical subject of the personal predicates; secondly, the person must be identical in order that the predicates can be referred to him intelligibly. The second condition is logically connected with the first, since the identity of a person is involved in the fact that he is the logical subject of the personal predicates. A person

cannot be logically the subject of such predication in our language, unless the person is identical. So personal identity is the logical condition of the possibility of reference of personal predicates i.e. of any personal language as such.

In addition to the personal predicates a person is also capable of having material predicates like different states of bodily existence. But the bodily predicates stand on a different level from the personal predicates, since the material predicates are not exactly identical with personal predicates. For example, the propositions 'X is ill' and 'X is six feet tall' do not have the same grammar, and each has a different use in our language. Nevertheless these refer to the same person who is, in two different senses, the logical subject of these two types of predicates. The attribution of material predicates, like personal predicates, requires the identity of the person who is the subject of both predicates. But in this case the identity of the person is not presupposed directly, since the mere identifiability of the person's body will suffice to make ascription of material predicates possible. Still, as person's identifiability is even presupposed by his bodily identifiability, ascription of material predicates has indirectly personal identity as a logical condition of its possibility. Thus, though both personal and material predicates have two different grammars of their own, they, nonetheless, have personal identity as a logical condition of the intelligibility of their grammars.

Our argument so far has sufficed to prove personal identity as a logical condition of there being an intelligible persona language at all. All personal predication references rest on this singular condition. Thus the evidence adduced for personal identity can be said to be logical and non-inductive, and this uniquely explains why personal identity has the force of a logically necessary truth in our language.

III

However, a sceptic may raise a question as to the logical necessity of personal identity. He may say that we accept personal identity on faith and there is no logical guarantee for it. Hume, for example, went to the extent of pointing out that the so-called personal identity is a "fictitious" concept and that such a concept

arises because of a confusion between the idea of 'sameness' of an object which is invariable and the idea of 'relatedness' among the successive states of an object.³ For Hume a person or a self is nothing but an aggregate of changing states of mind and so the so-called identity is another name for the 'relatedness' among these successive states.

Hume's scepticism regarding personal identity is based on a wrong approach to the notion of 'identity' or 'sameness', since he believes that what is identical must be non-changing and what changes cannot remain identical⁴. But it can be seen that even if a thing changes it can remain numerically identical, as it is usually the case with objects as well as persons. But the greatest difficulty with Hume's scepticism is that it fails to explain the unity of human experience which necessarily presupposes a unity of self or, in other words, personal identity. Kant was at pains to show that personal identity is the only logical ground of the unity of human experience. According to Kant, if the successive experiences of an object are not referred to a single self which possesses them, it is difficult to explain the unity or coherence of our experience. The fact that a unified experience is possible itself proves that self-identity is logically necessary.

Besides, as we have referred to earlier, without the presupposition of personal identity our language, in which we communicate and think, will not be intelligible, since, for instance, we cannot refer any predicates to any individual; that is, the whole of our predication language will collapse, and we will cease to think meaningfully. Therefore any doubt as to personal identity is logically impossible if we are to think and be able to use language at all.

Scepticism undermines the very grounds on which our language and thought stand. It suspects the very authenticity of our common form of behaviour. Personal identity is the last logical ground of most of our common behaviour or, what Wittgenstein would call, our 'form of life'⁵. As such it cannot be doubted and must be accepted as indispensably true. A sceptic no doubt will accept that personal identity is indispensable, but he doubts that there is any logical ground of this indispensability. But he is wrong in not seeing the fact that personal identity itself is the

logical ground of the possibility of our thought and experience. It is here that all our scepticism ceases because we cannot doubt the very grounds of our thought. Therefore we are constrained to accept it as something inescapably true.

To sum up, personal identity is a logical necessity about our thought and language and it stands as a unique category like the concept of person in our conceptual system. So it has to be accepted as a logical truth, and scepticism with regard to it is logically impossible.

R. C. Pradhan

Department of Philosophy
Utkal University
Bhubaneswar

NOTES

1. Sydney Shoemaker emphasises that memory can explain personal identity. See *Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity* (Allied Publishers Pr. Ltd., Bombay, New Delhi, 1963, First Indian Reprint, 1971) Page 35.
2. P. F. Strawson, *Individuals, An Essay In Descriptive Metaphysics* (Methuen and Co. Ltd., London, 1959; University Paperbacks, 1964) Page 103.
3. Terence Penelhum, 'Hume on Personal Identity' rept. in *Hume, A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. V. C. Chappell (Macmillan, London, 1968) pp. 221-223.
4. *Ibid.*, Pages 226-227.
5. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1967) Part II, p.226.

logical ground of the possibility of our thought and experience. It is true that all our knowledge comes because we cannot doubt the very grounds of our thought. Therefore we are constrained to accept it as something necessarily true.

In sum, an *identical identity* is a logical necessity about our thought and language and it stands as a simple category like the category of person in our conceptual system. So it has to be accepted as a logical truth and cognition with regard to it is logically indispensable.

R. C. FRYMAN

Department of Philosophy
Yale University
New Haven

NOTES

1. Logical positivists emphasize that identity can express a functional identity. See Ziff-Korshak and Ziff-Korshak (1967) *Philosophy of Language*, New York, 1967, from London (1967) Page 10.

2. F. R. Schmitt, *Philosophy of Language*, in *Essays in Philosophy*, Martin, (1967) *Philosophy of Language*, London, 1967, University of London (1967) Page 101.

3. Thomas Parsons, *Philosophy of Language*, in *Essays in Philosophy*, Martin, (1967) *Philosophy of Language*, London, 1967, University of London (1967) Page 101.

4. Ibid., Page 101-102.

5. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. Hughes (1953) Blackwell, Oxford, 1953, Part II, p. 124.