

CRITIQUES OF THE MEMORY CRITERION

Identity & Literature (Summer 2013)

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JOSEPH BUTLER

»» 1692-1752

CIRCULARITY PROBLEM

- ▶ “consciousness of personal identity presupposes, and therefore cannot constitute, personal identity” (100)
 - To analyze whether A remembers enough of what happened to B to be identical with B, we have to presuppose that A persisted from B onward

- ▶ My memory of my past assures me that I have persisted, BUT
 - Memory does not constitute personal identity
 - “present consciousness of past actions, or feelings, is not necessary to our being the same persons who performed those actions, or had those feelings” (100)

IMPERMANENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

- ▶ Our consciousness (e.g., memories, perceptions) are constantly changing, fleeting
- ▶ Personal identity presumes some level of permanence (for it to make sense to call someone *persisting* through time)
- ▶ Someone with faulty memories or consciousness is just as capable of persisting as someone with perfect memories and consciousness

THOMAS REID

»» 1710-1796

PROBLEMATIC IMPLICATIONS

- ▶ If can transfer consciousness to multiple intelligent beings, then can have 1 person persisting in many beings.
- ▶ If an intelligent being continually loses and regains consciousness, then 1 intelligent being would be multiple persons.
- ▶ *“a man may be, and at the same time not be, the person that did a particular action” (114)*

BOY-SOLDIER-GENERAL EXAMPLE

- ▶ Consciousness of general might not extend to boy
 - But logic of transitivity of identity requires that he is the same person as the boy



MEMORY AS EVIDENCE

- ▶ Memories provide us with *evidence* that someone has persisted through time
 - BUT memory does not have a “strange magical power of producing its object, through that object must have existed before the memory or consciousness which produced it” (116)
- ▶ Memory is ever-changing—could not constitute stable identity (or serve as foundation for moral responsibility)
 - Consciousness can be *similar* over time, but we are interested in *identity* of persons
 - Problem of sleeping!

SYDNEY SHOEMAKER

»» 1931-

LOGIC OF MEMORY

- ▶ Memory statements are generally* true IF
 - The person understands what “I remember that...” means
 - The person is not trying to lie
- ▶ If someone’s memory statements were **not** generally true, then we would legitimately assume
 - That he/she was a perpetual liar
 - That he/she was not using memory–language correctly
 - That he/she only *seemed* to remember
- ▶ **Generally* true: Because some of our memories, especially distant ones, are subject to imperfections/distortions

BODILY CRITERION

- ▶ To teach someone how to use “I remember that...” accurately, we cannot reference a memory criterion.
- ▶ Need to reference empirical facts re: whether someone actually was physically present to witness the event
- ▶ “Bodily identity is certainly *a* criterion of personal identity, and if it were not, I have argued, nothing else could be so much as evidence of personal identity” (129)
 - Because need to establish accurate vs. inaccurate claims of PID

MULTIPLE CRITERIA

- ▶ Prince and cobbler body swap
 - Does NOT show that someone can exist without a body
 - Does NOT show that the mind exists as a distinct substance
 - DOES provide “*prima facie* evidence that memory is a criterion” (131)

- ▶ Memory cannot be the sole criterion for PID
 - Or else we would not have any way to teach people how to use “I remember that...” language accurately

- ▶ Bodily identity cannot be the sole criterion for PID
 - Or else all memory claims would need to be subject to inductive inference, empirical investigations—which we do not (and should not) do
 - Prince & cobbler inference would be absurd

»» Discussion

CRITICAL EVALUATION

- ▶ Have these critiques of the memory criterion convinced you that it cannot be the sole criterion for PID?
 - How might Locke respond?
- ▶ Which of these critiques is the most compelling? Least compelling?
- ▶ Has Shoemaker made a good case for having multiple criteria for PID, including memory and bodily?
 - What is your evaluation of the prince and cobbler example?

QUESTIONS?

»» Comments?