

INTRODUCTION:
PERSONAL IDENTITY QUESTIONS &
WHY THEY MATTER

Identity & Literature (Summer 2013)

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Key Questions

◉ Who am I?

- Self-concept, self-description
- Traits, properties you happen to have ~can change over time

◉ What is a person?

- Criteria that are required for the special personhood status (conceptually distinct from being human)

Key Questions

- What is needed for someone to persist across time?
 - Conditions for surviving as the same individual, despite changes to physical or psychological features/states
 - Diachronic identity
- What evidence is needed to determine whether someone persists?
 - Examples: physical continuity or psychological continuity

Key Questions

- How many individuals exist at a given time?
 - Number of currently existing individuals/persons in the general population or within the same organism
 - Synchronic identity
- What am I?
 - Examples: biological organism, immaterial mind/soul, compound of mind + body, nothing at all
- How could I have been?
 - Essential/necessary vs. contingent/accidental traits

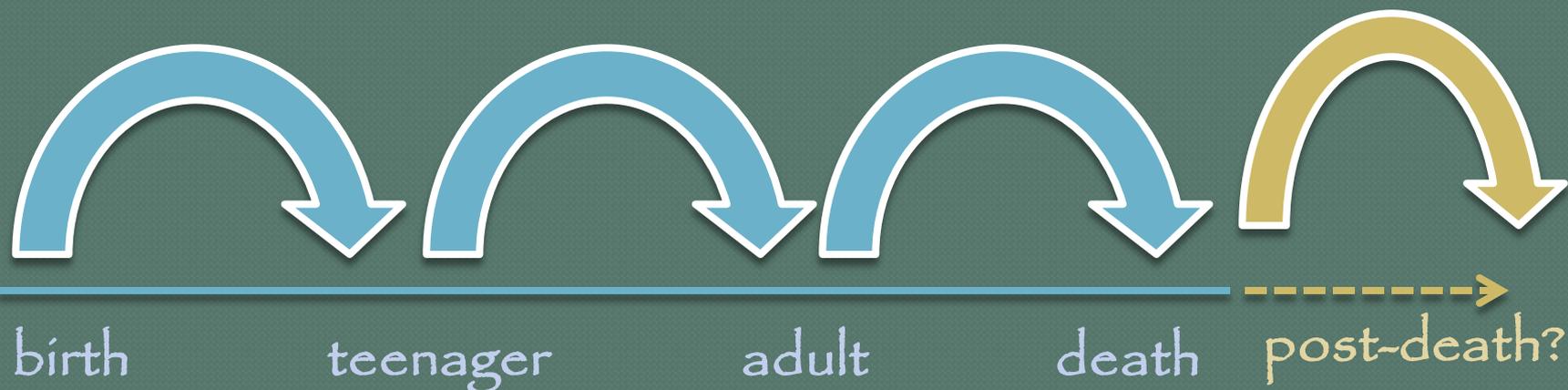
Key Questions

◉ What matters in identity?

- Moral responsibility, accountability
- What we should try to save
- How we should view biological death (and death rituals)
- Whether I should care about future and past “me”



Persistence Question



5 different individuals?

Infinite individuals?

1 individual?

Something else?

Persistence over Time

- ◉ Looking for necessary and sufficient conditions
- ◉ Numerical identity
 - How many individuals do we count over time?
 - Different from qualitative identity, which is about exact similarity of traits
 - Baby Jack and Adult Jack are qualitatively distinct but perhaps numerically identical
 - Twin Amy and Twin Jane are numerically distinct but perhaps qualitatively identical

If A and B are numerically distinct...

A and B (could) have different

- ◉ Property rights/possessions
- ◉ Wills
- ◉ Marital relationships/statuses
- ◉ Birth/death dates

Problematic if
A and B once
occupied the
same body

What if I change?

- As long as it makes sense to say that I have lost my memories (for example), then there is not a question of me ceasing to exist.
 - I can change in how I describe or conceive of myself.

Jane experiences changes over time, but stays numerically identical.

birth death

VS.

A break happens in numerical identity, so Jane ceases to exist, but Amy comes into being.

Jane Amy
birth death
birth death

Only talking about persons?

- ◉ Not necessarily!
 - Embryos and corpses are (arguably) not persons
 - **Persons** have high-level mental properties
 - Persistence conditions might be *physical* in nature
- ◉ **Person essentialism:** “whatever is a person at one time must be a person at every time when she exists” (Olson 12)
 - So no person has ever been an embryo... (unless embryos are persons)



Tombstone exercise

- ◉ For your epitaph, fill out the following while lying on your deathbed:
 - I am:
 - I am:
 - I am:
- ◉ Do you have different answers than you did yesterday?

Surviving death?

- ◉ Weirob's body will rot, but will she continue to exist?
- ◉ "Survival means that tomorrow, or sometime in the future, there will be someone who will experience, who will see and touch and smell—or at the very least, think and reason and remember. And this person will be *me*" (Perry 327)
 - Care about **numerical identity** when it comes to surviving death, not qualitative identity

Evidence problem

- ◉ How do I know that Weirob @ 9 am is numerically identical to Weirob @ 5 pm?
- ◉ Concern: The soul, as an immaterial and unobservable substance, cannot provide us with any evidence.
 - “Same body, same soul” is not verifiable or falsifiable
- ◉ “But our judgments about persons are not simply groundless and silly, so we must not be judging of immaterial souls after all” (Perry 334)



The River Problem

- ◉ Could have similar psychological traits across time without having an identical soul over time
- ◉ In the same way, a river could have similar states of water over time (muddy, blue, arid) even if its water molecules are not identical over time
- ◉ My soul could be gradually changed but closely linked over time (“flow of souls”), and you and I would not necessarily know!

Questions? Comments?
