

Class Six: Personal Identity: The Classical Discussion

Philosophy and Science Fiction - Ryan Simonelli

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1 The Question of Personal Identity in Moon

- **Questions of Personal Identity:** What make you *you*? If someone were to make a molecule for molecule replica of you, clearly, it'd *think* it was you, since it'd have all of your memories, but would it *be* you?
- **Who Are the Two Main Characters of *Moon*?:** The main characters of the movie are both named "Sam Bell." GERTY says, of both of them, that they both *are* Sam Bell. But this seems impossible, for a few different reasons.
 - "Sam Bell" is the name of a particular person. So, if they're *both* Sam Bell, then that would mean that they're the *same* person. Clearly, however, they're *different* people. Or are they?
 - If only one person can be Sam Bell, it seems that this person is the *original* Sam Bell, who's voice we hear off camera during the video call. It seems that both of the main characters take *that person* to be *them*, but, clearly, that person is *not* either of them. Or is he?
- **The Two Sams:** The first Sam that we encounter in the movie—the sickly and slightly kooky Sam—is the *fifth* clone that has been working on the moon. It is year fifteen of the project, and each clone lasts three years. The second Sam that we encounter—the more lively and aggressive Sam—is the *sixth* clone. If we want a way to talk about them without ambiguity, we can call them "Sam₅" and "Sam₆" respectively.
- **Filling In Some Details:** Let us suppose that, fifteen years prior to the time the movie takes place, the original Sam Bell (who we might call "Sam₀") had trained for years to be a moon excavator for Lunar Industries. When he was about to embark on a three year contract to the moon, he received a great offer: he'd get paid in full for the contract, but he'd never actually have to go to the moon. Rather, they'd take down all of his information, molecule by molecule, and reconstruct an exact duplicate of him on the moon, with all of his memories except for the memory of agreeing to be cloned.
 - This way of filing in the details ensures that the Sams on the moon are (almost completely) *psychologically continuous* with the original Sam, at least as he was when he was first replicated (though the movie takes place fifteen years after this event).
 - We can suppose that the differences in character traits between Sam₅ and Sam₆ is due to changes in Sam₅ that took place through the three years he was on the moon; when he first woke up on the moon, Sam₅ was exactly like Sam₆ is when we first see him.
- **Qualitative vs. Numerical Identity:** We can distinguish between two senses in which we may say that something's "identical to" or "the same as" something else.
 - **Qualitative Identity:** If I see that you also have a 2021 Honda Civic, I might say to you "I have the same car as you." What I mean is that I have the same *model* car, not that we literally have one in the same car. If both of our cars are the same color and fresh from the factory, they might be *qualitatively identical*. However, I can put a bumper sticker on mine to distinguish it from yours, since your car and mine are, though qualitatively identical, *numerically distinct*.

- **Numerical Identity:** If I say to my brother “I have the same mother as you,” what I mean is that there is literally one person who is both of our mothers. I cannot put a bumper sticker on my mom to distinguish her from my brother’s mom, since our mom is *numerically one*—she’s a single person.
- **Types vs. Tokens:** The distinction between qualitative and numerical identity is closely related to a distinction between types and tokens.
 - **Types:** In 2021, Honda made millions of Civics. If we both have one, we “have the same car” in the sense of having the same *type* of car.
 - **Tokens:** On the other hand, if we co-own a single 2021 Honda Civic, we don’t only have the same *type* of car—we have the same *token* car as well.
- **Sam Bell as a Type Rather than an Individual?:** One way of making sense of GERTY’s statement is to distinguish between Sam Bell as a *type* and Sam Bell as an *individual*. On this construal the two main characters are both Sam Bells in the sense that my car and your car might both be Honda Civics.
 - Something about this idea seems right, but it doesn’t itself suffice to resolve the weirdness of this case. Both of our Sams feel more than that they are the same *type* as the original Sam—they feel that they are *that very individual*. But once again, it seems that they cannot be.

2 Locke on Personal Identity

- **John Locke:** Some facts:
 - English philosopher who lived from 1632-1704.
 - Considered the first of the great *British Empiricists*, with the other two being David Hume and George Berkely.
 - First to seriously discuss the question of personal identity, in its modern form.
- **Criterion of Identity:** A principle that determines whether some entity, at one point in time, is the *same* entity as some possibly distinct entity, at another point in time. One of Locke’s ideas is that criteria of identity can *differ* depending on the kind of entity whose identity is our concern.
 - **Hunks of Matter:** A hunk of matter is the hunk of matter that it is in virtue of being composed of the specific particles of matter that compose it. If you replace the particles of a piece of metal with other particles, for instance, you no longer have the same piece of metal.
 - **Living Beings:** A living being, such as a plant or animal, can’t be identified with a specific set of particles, since the particles constantly change through consumption and excretion, but the living thing continues to exist as living its same life. What is important here is not the specific *matter* but the *form*—the way in which the matter is *organized*.
 - * Artifacts, whose identity is closely linked to their function, seem to have this sort of criterion of identity as well. Recall (from the very first class) the Ship of Theseus.
 - **Persons:** The criteria identity for a *person* who is *rational*, *self-conscious*, and can *think about* their own identity cannot be equated with the criteria of identity for an animal.
 - * This intuition can be pumped by considering the possibility of a person coming to occupy the body of an animal such as a lion or a lamb and being the same person (but in an animal’s body), whereas it’s hard to make sense of a lion coming to occupy a lamb’s body and still being the same lion.
- **Consciousness and Memory Are Key:** The key criteria for personal identity, according to Locke, is the capacity to consciousness to be “extended backwards to any past action or thought,” (9). I am identical with someone possibly distinct person just in case there is a unity in consciousness in the sense that I can extend my consciousness back to that person.

- **Makes Sense of Bodily Transfer:** The reason it is possible for two people to switch bodies, for instance, in the movie *Freaky Friday*, is that when Tess (Jamie Lee Curtis) switches bodies with her daughter Anna (Lindsay Lohan), she retains *her* memories, and is able, in Anna's body, to "extend consciousness back" to her—Tess's—prior thoughts and actions.
- **Some Bullets Need to Be Bit:** One counter-intuitive consequence of Locke's account is that, if someone gets completely black-out drunk some night, such that they don't remember anything from that night, then they're not identical with the person who performed those actions that night.
 - * Presumably, we have *instrumental* reasons to punish people who acted badly when they were blackout drunk, holding them responsible, but there's still a sense in which, on Locke's account, such people aren't *really* responsible.

Despite the aforementioned bullet, on the whole, it seems like a relatively reasonable account.

3 Attempting to Apply Locke's Account to *Moon*

- **Who Is Sam Bell?:** Is either Sam₅ or Sam₆ identical to Sam₀?
- **Memory in *Moon*:** Towards the end of the movie, we have both Sam₅ and Sam₆ apparently *remembering* first asking out their wife, Tess. It seems that they are both able to "extend their consciousness back" to these actions that they seem to have done, calling Tess, asking her if she wanted to get ice cream, and so on. But are they *really* remembering, *really* extending their consciousness back, or only *seeming* to?
- **Two Different Example:** Consider two cases of standard memory implantation of the sort explored in Phillip K. Dick's "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale."
 - First, if I go to Rekal Inc. and get false memories implanted of a trip to Mars, when I think through these false memories, I'm not *really* remembering my trip to Mars, because there *was no* trip to Mars. The events never happened, and only events that have happened can be remembered.
 - Second, if I go to Rekal Inc and get memories implanted of Napoleon's victory at Toulon, from Napoleon's perspective, it also seems, that, when I think through these memories, I'm not remembering my victory at Toulon, because it's wasn't *my* victory—I'm not Napoleon.
- **The Problem:** On Locke's account, we should answer the question of whether Sam₅ is identical to Sam₀ by asking whether Sam₅ is capable of remembering things done by Sam₀, such as asking Tess out. However, the question whether Sam₅ really *remembers* asking Tess out, or only *seems* to, ultimately comes down to whether the person who asked Tess out was *him*.
- **The Lesson:** This is the classic problem with Locke's account, famously pointed out by Joseph Butler: it *presupposes* the very thing that it's supposed to *explain*.
- **Further Questions:**
 - **Questions of Symmetry and Asymmetry:** Suppose we settle that Sam₅ *really does* remember asking Tess out, so has the right sort of psychological contentedness to count as identical to Sam₀, by Locke's criterion. It still seems that Sam₀ is completely psychologically *disconnected* from Sam₅, sharing none of the memories of his life. There seems to be a kind of asymmetry here. Identity, however, must be symmetric: if *a* is identical to *b*, then *b* must be identical to *c*. So what should we say about this apparent asymmetry?
 - **Questions of Self-Concern:** In an apparant act of self-sacrifice, Sam₅ volunteers to stay on the Moon, going back to the rover in which he crashed to be found dead by the rescue team. In his last moments, he sees Sam₆ fly off back to Earth and seems to feel a

sense of happiness. To what extent is his act different than an ordinary act of altruism where someone sacrifices themselves for a completely different person?

4 Some Other Related Cases

- **Teletransportation:** A familiar example from science fiction media such as Star Trek: there is a device that can “transport” you from one place to another, say, from Earth to the Moon. The way it works, however, is by scanning you for all the information about your body and brain, then vaporizing your body, completely destroying it in an instance, then beaming the information over to a transporter on the Moon where your body and brain are reconstructed, molecule from molecule, from a vat of organic matter on the Moon.
 - Once people start doing this, they’ll likely be convinced that it works just fine and is totally safe.
 - * Do we have grounds to call their conception of themselves into doubt?
 - Suppose the destructing mechanism fails, so the original copy is preserved, and then we have a duplicate on the Moon (this will give us a scenario rather like the one depicted in Moon).
 - * If you think you survive in the case where the destructing mechanisms functions, do we have grounds to think you survive in this case as well?
- **Brain-Splitting:** It is supposedly possible for a person to lose an entire half of their brain—one full hemisphere—and survive, retain memory, and still be the person they were before. If that’s so, then it’s possible for there to be a case in which the half of the brain that is removed is implanted into another body, where the person in that body will also retain memories of the original person.
 - If one can survive the first case, then could one survive the second?
- **Uploading:** Similar to the teletransporter case, but, in this case, the information about my body and brain is not used to reconstruct me *physically*, but *virtually*, with the processes of my body and brain being implemented on a computer.
- **Strongly Self-Identifying Clones:** In *Moon*, Sam₅ and Sam₆ strongly resist the identification of themselves as clones. In Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Nine Lives,” she presents a scenario of a set of nine clones who not only accept their own existence as clones, but whose identity is so connected to their being clones that they cannot really exist as individuals. In the story, though there is a sense in which each individual clone exists individually, the whole “nineclone” is really a single person, spread out across nine humans.
 - Does Locke’s accounts of personal identity enable us to make sense of this sort of phenomenon? If not, do we need a different one that can?