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Introduction

1.1 IDENTITY PUZZLES

Throughout history philosophers have puzzled over questions of identity:

Is a person identical with that person's body? Of course, if the person lives on after the body no longer exists, they are distinct, and if the person ceases to exist at death but the body continues in existence, they are distinct. But what if they always coexist?

Suppose a ship sets sail, and while at sea it is completely rebuilt, plank by plank; is the resulting ship with new parts the ship that originally set sail? What if the discarded pieces of the original ship are assembled into a ship; is *that* the ship that originally set sail?

If a person has a brain transplant, or a memory transplant, or . . . is the resulting person the same person who antedated the operation, or has the old person ceased to exist, to be replaced by another?

These, and a host of puzzles like them, persist without adequate solutions. Each puzzle is actually a vague description of a spectrum of cases, some of which give rise to one answer, and some of which give rise to the opposite answer, with sufficient cases in between to bewilder just about anyone, regardless of their instincts; thus the puzzles persist.¹

¹ This way of construing the puzzles carries out a theme of van Inwagen (1988), which describes a cabinet in which a person undergoes disruptive changes, so that you are uncertain whether the person who emerges is the person who entered. Van Inwagen suggests that anyone can fine-tune what happens inside the cabinet so as to yield a case about which the fine-tuner is uncertain.

Consider the ship case. Sometimes we can disassemble an object into parts and then reassemble those parts into the original object. I may have to do this in order to get my favourite desk into a new room; this is a way to move my desk into the new room, not a way of destroying it and replacing it with a new desk. (If you are not convinced by this, think of taking apart a blender to wash it and then putting it back together again.)² So sometimes reassembling parts yields the original object. But sometimes I repair an object by replacing a part; if I replace the radiator in my car with a new one I think I still own a car that I bought several years ago, not one that just sprang into existence. So sometimes replacing a part yields the original object. The “ship of Theseus”³ example above illustrates a case in which our judgements about identity are supposed to be in clear conflict: the original ship has apparently been disassembled and reassembled, and the original ship has apparently been repaired by having new parts installed. But these cannot both be true, because two non-identical ships have resulted.

Perhaps you see one of the options as being clearly superior to the other? Then a minor adjustment in the case will bring them into conflict:

If you are sure the ship with new parts is the original ship, suppose that the new parts of the repaired ship are quite unlike the parts being replaced, making the ship with new parts unlike the original ship—as unlike as you need to weaken your judgement of identity. (You may also wish to suppose that the activity is part of a contest to see how creatively the contestants can disassemble a ship and reassemble it, thus favouring the reassembled ship as being the original ship.)

If you are sure the “reassembled” ship is the original ship, just reassemble most but not all of the discarded parts, mixing in a

² If you are inclined to be sceptical about even such a case as this, consider what *you* would say if asked where you purchased your blender. You would never say “I didn’t purchase it, I created it after the parts were last washed.” So you must admit that you talk *as if* an object can be reassembled. And you must admit that this is serious talk, worth explaining, so the idea that what you say is plausible because it is *literally true* is an option well worth exploring. That is enough to open the door to theorizing on the identity question.

³ A ship example originates in Plutarch’s *Life of Theseus*. This was updated by adding a second ship by Hobbes in *De Corpore*, 2, 11. I have added the twist that the repair/replacement takes place at sea; this is not essential to the example.

few new ones. Adjust the number of parts upward or downward until you are no longer sure about what to say. If necessary, leave some of the original parts in the ship with (mostly) new parts.

Some philosophers have been driven by examples of this sort to provide a *method* for answering any such question. The most popular methods are the simplest. For example, some propose that having the same parts is necessary for identity, and any change of parts whatever leads to non-identity; there is never any such thing as repair by replacement of a part. Others propose that continuity of size, shape, and function are required to maintain identity, so that there is never any such thing as reassembly. These are extreme positions; they are often admired for the ingenuity that goes into defending them, but they have few real adherents. Instead, most philosophers try to devise a subtler criterion for identity preservation that avoids such extreme judgements, a criterion that will allow us to say “Aha, that’s it”, whenever the criterion is applied. Such methods (when not overly vague) give natural answers in the problematic cases, but other clever philosophers inevitably devise new cases in which the “subtle” methods ride roughshod over our surest judgements. Proponents of such views then must either refine them, or explain why normal intelligent people are wrong to reject them. A great deal of ingenuity has gone into the defence of and attack on such views; none of that discussion will be reprised here. It is clear that none of the methods has won popular acceptance, and this motivates us to look elsewhere.

Because so many identity puzzles have remained unsolved for centuries, some observers have been led to speculate that these are questions that have no answers. But that raises other questions. Why don’t they have answers? What would it take for them to have answers?

The most popular option in this century is that the questions have no answers because they are improperly formulated, typically because they incorporate a definite description that does not uniquely denote. Sometimes this is plausible. It is plausible in the “building” case. Suppose that Old Ivy Hall has an addition built onto it, tripling it in size without altering the structure of the original in any significant way, and the new large building is named Post-modern Hall. My office is in the old part and yours is in the new

part. Someone asks “Is the building in which Parsons has his office the building in which you have your office?” It seems clear that this has no unique correct answer, and that this is because the definite description ‘the building in which Parsons has his office’ does not uniquely denote. Buildings can be parts of other buildings, and Old Ivy Hall is now a part of Postmodern Hall. My office is in Old Ivy Hall, and also in Postmodern Hall, and these are not the same building; one is part of the other. So there is no such thing as *the* building in which I have my office. And so the identity question is ill-formed.

This solution is plausible because buildings are parts of other buildings. It is less plausible to think that ships are parts of other ships (at least for normally designed ships), and quite implausible that persons are parts of other persons. Yet this is what it would take to solve the harder cases in parallel fashion. For example, you *could* say that the definite description ‘the original ship’ fails to uniquely denote, because there were actually two original ships: one that was later repaired with new parts, and one that was later reassembled from the original parts. This is not plausible.⁴

I do not believe that a systematic diagnosis of identity puzzles in terms of imperfections in our language, or in the concepts embodied in our language, will be satisfactory. This is certainly a natural option, and one that I need to discuss (Chapter 10). However, my main task is to explore an alternative that I find more plausible.

1.2 WORLDLY INDETERMINACY OF IDENTITY

I am inclined to think that an identity question can be completely coherent and well formed and yet lack an answer because of the way the world is (or because of the way the world is not). Not that there is an unknown answer, but rather that there is no answer at all. In the ship case above, the facts are these: there is a unique original ship, there is a unique ship with new parts, and there is a unique newly assembled ship. The ship with new parts is distinct

⁴ I examine some closely related but more plausible views in Ch. 10.

from (non-identical with) the newly assembled ship. But there is no fact of the matter regarding whether the newly assembled ship is the original ship, or whether the ship with new parts is the original ship.

When there is no fact of the matter, a sentence reporting the purported fact lacks truth-value. So the following sentences have the indicated statuses:

the newly assembled ship = the ship with new parts	False
the newly assembled ship = the original ship	No truth-value
the ship with new parts = the original ship	No truth-value

These indeterminacies must cohere with certain others as well. It is indeterminate whether the newly assembled ship formerly left port when the original ship did, and likewise for the ship with new parts. It is indeterminate whether the original ship now has new parts. And so on.

Each of the sentences listed above non-defectively reports a state of affairs, a state of affairs of identity. The first state of affairs is made not to hold by the way the world is, but the second and third are not either made to hold or made not to hold by the way the world is. Thus there is genuine *indeterminacy of identity in the world*. This is not an illusion generated by indeterminacy as to how our language fits with the world; the indeterminacy is real.

There is now a growing literature on the question of worldly indeterminacy of identity, stimulated almost wholly by a one-page article by Gareth Evans (1978), giving a proof that there cannot be genuine indeterminacy of identity in the world. This proof has been attacked, defended, revised, expanded, and so on. The literature on this subject has now matured to the point where an extended look at the issues seems both timely and feasible. Discussion of the issues so far has proceeded on a number of fronts, and on a piecemeal basis. What does not yet exist is a single coherent presentation of a position that articulates and defends worldly indeterminacy of identity. That is the task of this book. There is little contained here that has not already been argued in the literature in one form or another. The contribution of this book is to choose from among the positive views a subset that can be maintained together, to express these in a common vocabulary, to assemble

them in a presentation that can be mastered by someone new to the topic, and to add a few details that may advance the issues.

In presenting the thesis of worldly indeterminacy of identity I speak as an advocate on its behalf. This is not because I am convinced it is true; indeed, if I am right, that is a contingent matter on which nobody can be certain. But it makes for a more coherent exposition if I take a definite stance on the issue. I *am* convinced that the existence of worldly indeterminacy of identity is both coherent and possible.

My goal is primarily to articulate the view in detail and in generality. The articulation of the view I take to be a matter of hypothesis formulation, and this is immune from certain kinds of criticism. For example, I cannot be said to beg the question merely by formulating what one answer to the question is. The main task of the book is just that: to formulate a position. I will also argue that the position is immune to certain kinds of attacks that have been levelled at it in the literature. Here I can be said to beg the question—but only if I presume a point at issue. The bulk of this book will be occupied with these two tasks: formulation of the view and defences of its coherence and prima-facie plausibility in the face of purported refutations. Neither of these tasks, even if successful, will show the view to be true. For that, what is required is to see whether it explains better than competing views do why certain identity questions *seem* to be coherent and yet lack answers. Some competing views will be discussed in Chapter 10, but many will not. And so the ultimate fate of the view will be left uncertain.

Methodologically, I take a Peircean perspective. I begin with ordinary beliefs, which I will reject only if some reason is found to challenge them. These are my tentative data: *ordinary* beliefs—such as the belief that I have exactly one wife, that there is exactly one dog in my back yard, and that exactly one ship set sail before the problematic replacement/repair/reassembly process. I reject philosophical analyses that contradict these judgements, telling me, for example, that I actually have several dogs, or that there is not really any such thing as a dog—there are only basic particles that swarm into dog-like shapes. It is also part of my methodology that I do *not* take as data highly theoretical philosophical generalizations, such as “nothing is indeterminate”, or “no two things can be in the same place at once”, or the opposites of such views.

I see these as theoretical observations which are to be validated by how well they conform to the data, as opposed to the other way around. I may occasionally rely on some theoretical views myself, but only by accident, or when I see no other way to resolve an issue.

I do not necessarily expect the reader to share this methodology, or to apply it exactly as I do; I articulate it here to clarify what I will and will not be doing. Many proposed solutions to the puzzles involve taking a stand that requires us to reject some of the apparent data, for example, rejecting the view that exactly one person entered the room in which the disruption took place. Let me call any such position a “traditional solution”. A traditional solution explains how and why we should *change* our beliefs, and shows how the puzzles are resolved if we do so. I will not discuss such solutions at all. There is an enormous literature devoted to this already, and there is no need for me to duplicate it. Instead I focus on proposed solutions that “preserve the data”, solutions that explain how it is that

The ordinary beliefs that we have about the identity puzzle cases are literally true.

I also limit myself by the working assumption that

It is literally true that there is no answer to the identity questions in the puzzle cases.

I will develop one such explanation, and I will discuss others.

1.4 A STOCK OF PUZZLES

It will help to have at hand a small stock of cases to discuss, and an indication of what I take the data to be in each.

The person/body: Assuming that a person exists when and only when their body exists,⁵ is each person identical with his/her body?

⁵ This assumption is crucial. For example, Stalnaker (1988: 354) says “we can distinguish intimately related things such as an artifact and what it is made of, a person and his or her body, by distinguishing their temporal properties.” The person/body puzzle discussed here is a hypothetical one: *what if* there were no

Data: If I am alone in a room, then there is exactly one person in the room, and exactly one human body in the room.

Working assumption: There is no answer to the question whether the person in the room is the body in the room.

The ship: An assembly/repair process takes place as described above. Is the original ship identical with the ship with new parts, or with the newly assembled ship (or neither)?

Data: Exactly one ship left port, and exactly two ships docked.

Working assumption: There is no answer to the question whether the original ship is the ship with new parts, or whether the original ship is the newly assembled ship.

The personal disruption: A person enters a room where something disruptive happens to them that challenges our judgements about personal identity. Is the person who entered the room identical with the person who later leaves the room?

Data: Exactly one person entered the room, and exactly one person left the room.

Working assumption: There is no answer to the question whether the person who entered the room is the person who left the room.

*The cat:*⁶ It is unclear exactly what the parts of a cat are. For example, it is unclear whether a molecule loosely attached to the end of a hair that is engaged in falling out is part of the cat. Consider all ways of answering such questions precisely. Call the object (if any) that answers to any such precise description of its parts a “p-cat”. There are many p-cats, and they are distinct from one another, because they all have different parts. How is the cat related to the p-cats? Is it identical to any of them? To none of them? (Are the p-cats cats? If so, how many cats are on the table when we naively think there is only one?)

Data: There is exactly one cat, and there are many p-cats.

Working assumption: For any given p-cat, there is no answer to the question whether it is the cat.

clear examples of temporal properties in which they differ? Of course, if they do not temporally coincide, then presumably one will be a person-at-t and the other not a person-at-t, so they will be definitely distinct. The puzzle is: what if they always coexist?

⁶ Patterned after an example in Lewis (1993).

You are asked in each case to adjust the details of the example so as to make the answer to the identity question most uncertain, based on *your* convictions. I will assume that I am addressing a reader who makes such adjustments to the cases under consideration.

For convenience later, I will refer to the above data together with the working assumptions as “extended data”. This is not to insist that they are correct, but rather to emphasize that I will be trying to account for them, not to argue for them.

The first and last of these questions involve cases of identity-at-a-time, and the middle two are cases of identity-across-time. People sometimes distinguish these, calling the first “coincidence” and the second “persistence”. I ignore the distinction because it is not relevant to any of the issues that I address.

1.5 PLAN OF THE BOOK

First I will address what is involved in there being indeterminacy in the world. Next, I will apply this to indeterminacy of identity. In both of these enterprises we need to clarify not only what a partially indeterminate world is like, but also how a language works that correctly describes such a world. Then I look at a number of arguments in the literature that attempt to show that positing indeterminacy of identity leads quickly to inconsistency. This is followed by a discussion of some variations of the inconsistency argument based on the logic and semantics of conditionals. Following this I discuss the complaint that we cannot conceive of identity’s being indeterminate, and I give a useful “classical picturing” of situations involving indeterminacy, including indeterminacy of identity. This is followed by a discussion of how we can count objects whose identities are partially indeterminate, and of how we can uniquely refer to such objects. Then certain alternative views are treated, views that locate indeterminacy wholly in language or in our concepts; the question is whether such a view can provide a better account of the data than the view that posits real indeterminacy. After this there is a discussion of how it is possible to develop a coherent theory of sets that allows sets to have indeterminate members; properties with indeterminate identity are also discussed. Finally I

briefly discuss what impact higher-order indeterminacy might have on this enterprise.

If I am successful, the reader will find a coherent statement of what it would be like if there were indeterminacy in the world, extending to indeterminacy of identity. (It would be what the world would be like if the world were exactly as we naïvely think it is.)