

Personal Identity: Complex or Simple?

Gasser, Georg, and Matthias Stefan, eds.

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This collection is a detailed treatment of the question of whether personal identity is complex or simple. This book makes a substantial contribution to the many ways we can answer this question and so forwards the perennial debate about personal identity. To answer this question, the authors clarify what the simple view of personal identity amounts to and what exactly distinguishes it from the complex view. One theme the book lives up to is giving the simple view its best shot at success.

The volume contains 12 essays that are divided into three parts: Part 1 “Framing the Question,” Part 2 “Arguments For and Against Simplicity,” and Part 3 “Reconsidering Simplicity.” The Introduction, by Georg Gasser and Matthias Stefan, provides a great overview of the relevant issues without boringly summarising the contents of every chapter. And Part 1 begins with a fun and lucid dialogue by David Barnett on the modal epistemology of thought experiments involving personal identity (designed to motivate the simple view) and the intrinsic (and thus simple) nature of conscious experience (38-40).

Eric T. Olson’s piece is a discussion about what grounds the simple/complex distinction. He notes that an account of personal identity can be understood in two ways. We may attempt to (metaphysically) ground facts about personal identity in more fundamental facts or provide a *constitutive* criterion in the form of “conditions individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a human person to persist from one time to another” (47). Here is a typical complex view:

(C) Necessarily, person P_1 at time t_1 is the same as person P_2 at time t_2 *iff* and *because* there is some *distinct* relation of mental or physical continuity between P_1 and P_2 or some other relevant entities (such as person-stages at t_1 and t_2).

By contrast, according to the simple view, there are no informative, non-trivial identity conditions for human persons and the fact that the identity relation holds between P_1 at t_1 and P_2 at t_2 requires no metaphysical explanation or grounding. Personal identity does not ‘consist in’ any relation besides identity. Despite this characterisation, Olson argues that “the simple view remains elusive” (62) since “no principle divides views about personal identity in the right place, or has the importance that the simple/complex distinction is traditionally ascribed” (58).

Harold W. Noonan provides what I think is the most promising account of the distinction. Noonan says “the simple view is that the concept of a person is the concept of a *sort* of persisting object not governed by non-trivial, non-redundant, non-identity-involving diachronic constraints. The complex view is that the concept of a person is the concept of a *sort* of persisting object which is governed by such constraints” (86, n. 2). I am not convinced by Olson’s objection against Noonan’s proposal (57). Others agree: Lynne Rudder Baker accepts this characterisation (180), while E.J. Lowe tacitly endorses it (141).

In Part 2 Richard Swinburne takes aim (more or less) at (C). He argues that if it is possible that person P_1 at t_1 is identical to P_2 at t_2 without some kind of mental or physical continuity, the complex view is false. His defence of the antecedent is based on an account of the notion of a metaphysically possible world in terms of logically consistent maximal descriptions that involve “informative rigid designators” (118).

The possible worlds where I exist tomorrow with a new brain or exist without memory of my previous existence are intuited from thought experiments involving brain/body-swaps, fission and memory deletion. Sentences such as, “I will exist without any memory of my previous existence,” involve informative designators (such as “I”) that ensure the world that fits such a description is metaphysically possible (119).

Sydney Shoemaker’s critique of the simple view directly addresses this argument. He notes that the sentence, “I will exist without any memory of my previous existence,” is only significant for determining the correct account of personal identity if we assume it provides us with, as Swinburne puts it, “a direct awareness of personal identity” (114). Shoemaker argues that “the fact that we have this special memory access to facts about our identity does not at all imply that there are not [sic] constitutive criteria of personal identity. We do not use any criteria of identity in making memory-based first-person identity judgments, so of course we do not use as a criterion the fact that the memory involved stands in certain causal relations to the past action or experience that it represents” (131).

Shoemaker then considers the objection that the major versions of the complex view are circular. This is the main objection that Lowe presents in defence of the simple view. On a neo-Lockean view, what makes person P_1 at time t_1 the same as P_2 at t_2 is the fact that P_2 (quasi-)remembers the experience e that P_1 had at t_1 . But, Lowe argues, this account presupposes identity conditions for experiences which are individuated by appealing to sameness of persons (150).

Shoemaker replies, quite rightly I might add, that when we are concerned with the individuation of experiences that are had by *one* person at a time, it is true that the identity of such experiences are grounded in the identity of the subject who has these experiences. But the individuation of these states does not involve diachronic or synchronic personal identity (156). Shoemaker concludes: “That the identity of each of the states is fixed by the identity of the person who has it is in no way incompatible with the claim that it is relations between the states that make it the case that they belong to one and the same person” (133). Lowe’s reply on p. 154 rests on a misinterpretation of this point by Shoemaker. Oddly enough, Part 2 ends with a dense chapter by Martine Nida-Rümelin that is not about *diachronic* identity. She argues that only conscious beings have non-descriptive individual natures.

In Part 3 Baker presents her own version of the simple view. She thinks we are ontologically emergent entities in virtue of being constituted by the mereological sums of our “ordinary” parts (such as our head, limbs and torso). So we are *not* immaterial substances. But, she endorses the claim that the only plausible identity conditions of persons are grounded in *sameness* of first-person perspectives. So her view counts as simple. There is little to no argument for the view. But her contribution is more about showing how we can have a simple view that is *not* committed to dualism.

Christian Kanzian defends the semantic claim that “person” is not a sortal, phase sortal, or accidental general term. It is rather *semantically incomplete* in that it depends on other terms to fulfil its role of picking out a “unit” (199). In the case of human persons, the term “human” is the sortal that “person” depends on to realise its function. For Kanzian, personal identity is itself simple but nonetheless “dependent in a unique way on something which is not simple: for example, on *human* identity” (203). I doubt this furthers the debate in any substantial way.

Dean Zimmerman discusses Swinburne’s argument that the complex view is false because thought experiments such as fission entail that mental and physical continuities hold where it is *equally* possible for me to be the person who has the left or right

hemisphere (218-9). Zimmerman argues that this argument does not entail that the simple view or dualism is true. If we endorse the doctrine of “emergent materialism” (224-7), a view to which I am sympathetic, then we can deny that fission entails two equally possible candidates by “positing an important immanent causal difference between otherwise indiscernible micro-psycho-states” (233).

Hudson discusses a problem for the complex theorist that arises from accepting one of three theories of time: the shrinking block, the growing block, and the disappearing branch view. If we accept one of these theories, it is possible that there is a *morphing* block—a plurality of hyperplanes that can shrink, grow or be hollowed out by deleting or adding hyperplanes (241). Hudson argues that the morphing block poses a problem for the complex theorist because they are committed to some kind of *causal dependence* that holds between persons or persons-stages at distinct times. Since the block can morph, causal dependence between entities across time is undermined, which leads to scepticism about personal identity judgments (247). The simple view has no causal requirement. Hence, it escapes this problem.

There is much in this collection that advances our understanding of the fundamental issues of the metaphysics of personal identity. There are heaps of arguments for various simple views and updated statements of positions that these leading philosophers have defended elsewhere. There are also many arguments that arise for the complex theorist from issues such as moral obligation, vagueness and indeterminacy (e.g., Ryan Wasserman; second half of Noonan). This book would be great for a graduate seminar on personal identity and should be of interest to metaphysicians, ethicists, and philosophers of mind working on the topic. It is also a testament to the fact that debates about personal identity are not merely conceptual but part of fundamental metaphysics.

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