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Can Views on Personal Identity Be Neutral about Ethics?

Abstract: Eric Olson and David Shoemaker argue that our numerical identity over time is irrelevant to such practical issues as moral responsibility or self-concern. Being the same individual at different moments in time may, in our case, can be seen as the preservation of the relevant biological processes (e.g., according to Olson), while psychological continuity, independent of these processes, may be crucial for such issues. I will defend the view that, contrary to the above authors, any conception of our diachronic identity has ethical implications, at least with regard to the aforementioned issues. My argument has two basic assumptions. (1) The dispute over identity of persons is a dispute over the conditions of *our* persistence in time as the same individuals, whether we consider being a person as our essential property or not (e.g., Olson maintains the latter). The question is under what conditions *I* am the same as a particular earlier or later individual. (2) The pronoun "I," on the other hand, is an essential component of practical reasoning, so also of ethical one. Thus, the debate on the persistence of persons concerns the identity conditions of the individuals to whom/which we refer when planning our future actions, formulating our intentions. My rational self-concern or my moral responsibility for past actions regards the individual to whom the pronoun refers. An additional result of my argument is to undermine the influential strategy of defending positions on our diachronic identity against the charge of controversial ethical implications. It cannot be argued in the case of every such controversy that a given ethical issue only apparently involves our identity, while in fact what is relevant to it is a different relation binding persons at different moments in time.

Introduction

The topic of the presentation is part of my research project on ethical premises in the debate on personal identity. I explore the possibility and effectiveness of using such premises in narrowing the range of plausible positions on personal identity. One way to do this is to identify which views are incompatible with certain assumed claims about morality or rationality, especially those that are intuitively accepted. To examine this, personal identity must be linked to ethical issues in some way. Specifically, views on personal identity should have some implications about morality or rationality, and therefore be potentially controversial in this aspect. So, in the presentation I will argue, against some prominent authors in the field - Eric Olson and David Shoemaker - that positions on personal identity do indeed have such consequences. I will focus on moral responsibility and rational self-concern (also called prudential or egoistic concern). First, however, I will give a brief introduction to the problem of personal identity.

1 Personal identity over time

It is a one of big topics in contemporary analytic metaphysics. The problem concerns numerical identity of persons over time. It is also described as the problem of diachronic personal identity or the problem of persistence of persons. The questions asked here are: Under what conditions do persons persist as the same individuals? What makes them one and the same despite changes in their properties or states, physical and mental? More technically speaking, when is a person *A* at a moment *t* the same individual as *B* at different moment *t**? Or, what is the necessary and sufficient condition, if there is any, of identity between *A* and some earlier or later individual *B*? Then, it is about some facts about persons, e.g. me and you, and not about our sense of being ourselves or about maintaining our properties which are important to us, like having a particular job or interests. If you have lost such sense or such properties, you can still exist. But if at some point in time there is no one numerically identical to you, then you no longer exist at that time.

There are three dominant types of responses to the personal identity issue. One can be traced to John Locke, who is seen as the pioneer of the debate and who inspires many authors participating in it. The views in this first group are labeled as “psychological”.

Here is a quote from Locke's second book of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1694/1975):

> *… in this alone consists* personal identity, i.e., *the sameness of rational being, and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that* person*; it is the same* self *now it was then; and it is by the same* self *with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done.* (II 27 §9)

And another, more concise one:

> *For the same consciousness being preserved, whether in the same or different substances, the personal identity is preserved.* (II 27 §13)

Contemporary authors inspired by Locke's conception speak about some kind of psychological relation which constitutes personal persistence. So they say, e.g., that the criterion of person *A* being identical to *B* is *psychological continuity*, which is defined as a chain of overlapping connections between *A*'s and *B*'s mental states – experiences and subsequent memories of them; desires, beliefs, and intentions; these connections can also consist in preservation of such states. The view of this type is proposed by Derek Parfit (1971, 1984; see also, e.g., Lewis 1976). There are some versions or modifications of psychological view. Some authors require psychological continuity to have a proper neurological cause (e.g. Perry 1976; Unger 1990; S. Shoemaker 1984; Noonan 1998; Beck 2011); some suggest the constraint of narrative connections between mental states (e.g. Schroer & Schroer 2014), some speak of phenomenal continuity, which is continuity of conscious experience – "unity of a stream of consciousness" – or continuity of something that supports a particular capability of conscious experience (e.g. Dainton & Bayne 2005). Another view, more materialistic, but in some respects similar to psychological approach, is one that requires only properly functioning brain – if we have the same functioning brain which maintains conscious mental life, then we have the same person (e.g. McMahan 2002).

The second group includes biological views which oppose to Locke-inspired conceptions. The proposed criterion of personal identity between *A* and *B* would be that they have the same *body* (e.g. Williams 1970) or, in another version, they are the same human *organism* or live the same *biological life* (e.g. Snowdon 1991; van Inwagen 1997; Olson 1997, 2007; Hershenov 2004). So, a person goes where a particular material body

or particular organism goes. According to the second option, a person's existence extends as long as a particular biological life process is maintained, independently of mental life.

The last group contains views which refrain from proposing any informative conditions of personal identity over time. They are labeled as simple views. According to this approach, diachronic identity of persons is a primitive, non-analyzable relation. So, there is no informative, non-circular criterion of it (e.g. Merricks 1998). Alternatively, some authors taking this type of position say that *A* and *B* are identical if they have or be the same *soul*, but there is no proper identity criterion for souls (e.g. Chisholm 1976; Swinburne 1984).

The point which is central for my argument is that the problem of personal identity is the problem of our identity. Thus, in particular, it is about my identity. This is a common way of expressing this issue, which can be found in explicit form in the works of authors supporting different positions on the subject (e.g. Olson 1997, 2007; Noonan 2010; Parfit 2012). So, anyone who takes part in this debate is asking a question about conditions of my persistence – persistence of a referent of a first-personal pronoun "I". The question is which past or future individual is me.

2 Ethical/practical consequences

I now turn to some standard, pre-theoretical assumptions about relations between personal identity and some of our ethical or practical concerns. I have picked moral responsibility and rational self-concern (sometimes referred to as prudential or egoistic concern).

If we claim that someone is morally responsible for a particular past action, we are looking for an earlier individual who is the author of that act and who is the same individual as the person now considered as responsible. So, we track in the past a particular agent identical to morally accountable person. Thus, personal identity which relates some earlier doer with later, morally responsible individual is one of conditions of such responsibility. In other words, being numerically the same person as someone who did something in the past is usually considered necessary for responsibility and a part of what is sufficient for this. There are more elements which jointly imply responsibility, e.g. awareness of performing an act, doing it intentionally, having a proper control over one's actions, etc. I focus only on the condition of identity. Then, the

question is who is responsible for some past action: a later individual psychologically related to the doer, a later individual having the same body or continuing the same biological life, or a later individual having the same soul? If this relations can be separated, as some hypothetical cases show, we may indicate different individuals using different criteria of personal identity. And in some situations, obtained answers to the question mentioned before can be controversial, namely, they can be inconsistent with our intuitive claims about assigning moral responsibility.

The case of rational self-concern is similar. It is assumed that to care about our own future wellbeing or existence is rational. And this kind of concern is usually different in kind from our concern for others. Probably, it is natural to think that it will be prudent or reasonable to avoid future pain or suffering. I will experience only my future pain or suffering. And also my future existence and future states, properties, or abilities are crucial to achieving my goals. But should I care in this special way for a later individual who is psychologically related to me, for a later individual having the same body or continuing my biological life, or for a later individual having the same soul? In some cases, using different criteria of identity may lead to divergent answers about future object of our rational self-concern.

Many authors debating on personal identity (e.g. Rovane 1997; Sidelle 1999; Unger 1990, 2000; McMahan 2002; Kovacs 2020) assume that the solution to this issue should be selected from discussed proposals by testing their compatibility with our intuitions about moral responsibility or rational self-concern. According to them, a plausible view on personal identity should follow our basic beliefs on such practical issues. Unfortunately, not much is said about why they should be consistent with such beliefs or intuitions. Matti Eklund (2004) modestly argues that *if* the problem of personal identity concerns subjects of morality and rationality, then its various solutions are correlated with different (potentially controversial) ethical claims. In later part of my presentation I will try to show that what the first part of this conditional states is really the case, namely, that – contrary to some critics – the question of our persistence conditions is about such subjects and, therefore, when answering it one cannot avoid some ethical consequences.

3 Practical (un)importance of our identity

Before I present my argument, I will show how some prominent contributors to personal identity debate try to detach this issue from practical issues like responsibility or self-concern. The first is Derek Parfit (1971, 1984) with his famous phrase *identity doesn't matter*. As an adherent of psychological view, he equates identity of persons over time with psychological continuity which is one-to-one. It means that in order to be identical to someone earlier or later, I have to be the only one who is psychological continuous with this individual. If at some point in time there is no one psychologically continuous with a particular person A or if there is more than one such individual, then, strictly speaking, there is no one identical to that person, which means she or he does not exist at that moment. Parfit argues that psychological continuity can divide in this way. So, in some hypothetical situations there can be more than one individual psychologically continuous with a given earlier person, e.g. we can think of this person's functioning hemispheres separately transplanted into two living human bodies. In such a fission case we end up with two recipients who can be psychologically continuous with the donor of functioning brain halves. Parfit concludes that preserved psychological continuity can be considered a necessary condition of moral responsibility and rational self-concern, regardless of being uniquely maintained, so also regardless of numerical identity between donor and two recipients. The donor's special care for recipients wellbeing can be rational and they can be assessed as morally responsible for donor's deeds.

I think Parfit's argument cannot be seen as completely separating personal identity from its potential ethical consequences. Even if Parfit is right, psychological continuity which is also one-to-one, then, personal identity as defined by psychological view remains a part of the sufficient condition of moral responsibility and rational self-concern. And also its occurrence guarantees that the necessary condition is fulfilled. If I am identical in Parfitian sense to someone earlier, I must be psychologically continuous with that individual, so I can be assessed as morally responsible for his deeds. If I am numerically the same as someone in the future, than I can be certain that the necessary condition of my special concern for his wellbeing or existence is rational because I must to be properly psychologically related to him.

3.1 Olson's (and D. Shoemaker's) view

To completely separate personal identity from practical issues like responsibility and self-concern one needs to go a step further than Parfit. This is what Eric Olson (1997) has done. He claims that such practical concerns follow *a relation* independent of our persistence as one and the same individual. According to him, our numerical identity can be reduced to continuity of biological life. Our persistence consists in our being the same organism or animal. But a practically important relation between persons at different moments in time is psychological continuity, which according to Olson's biological view is independent of the continuity of biological life. E.g. biological life can continue after mental life of human organism ends. Or I can still exist as a given living organism even if my functioning brain has been transplanted into different body and, thus, even if my mental life is "transferred" in this way. So, this is how Olson describes the relation between personal identity and practical issues:

> *Ultimately it is for ethicists to tell us when prudential concern is rational, when someone can be held accountable for which past actions, and who deserves to be treated as whom. These are not metaphysical questions …* (1997, p. 69)

He also says:

> *I tried to argue that the relations of practical concern that typically go along with our identity through time are closely connected with psychological continuity. If that is right, then the Biological Approach does have an interesting ethical consequence, namely that those practical relations are not necessarily connected with numerical identity.* (1997, p. 70)

Another prominent author who challenges assumptions about the connection between personal identity and ethics is David Shoemaker (2016). He argues that our practical concerns follow *several various relations* independent of identity. According to him, different relations, which define various kinds of ownership, are essential for different concerns. Here are examples of ownership: a certain past action is my own if I am properly related to the person who performed it; a particular future pleasant experience will be my own if I am properly related to the subject of this experience. In his essay titled *The Stony Metaphysical Heart of Animalism*, D. Shoemaker says:

> *The basic assumption I want to argue against is that our practical concerns constitute a unified set that is grounded on psychological continuity. What is actually the case, I will urge, is that the grounding relation is neither psychological*

> *continuity nor, ultimately, identity; it is, rather, ownership, which itself takes multiple forms.* (2016, p. 317)
>
> *The relation on which our various practical concerns are grounded is not numerical identity but is instead what I have referred to as the ownership relation. … I believe that the practical concerns* just aren't unified*, that what each of their relevant ownership relations consist in are simply different. I advocate pluralism regarding our person-related practical concerns in virtue of their plural grounds.* (2016, p. 325)

In particular, D. Shoemaker claims that moral responsibility and self-concern are related to distinct kinds of ownership which require different diachronic relations between persons. Referring to moral responsibility, he claims:

> *I may be the joint owner of actions produced by a joint agent. … psychological continuity is neither necessary nor sufficient for ownership in this arena. … responsibility-ownership consists in something like the preservation of the psychological elements contributing to one's volitional network, but this may be very different from psychological continuity…* (2016, p. 319)

And, according to him, the sort of ownership essential for self-concern:

> *… could well run independently of identity. … This sort of ownership … does indeed start to sound like robust psychological continuity.* (2016, pp. 320–321)

3.2 First person and the practical

I argue that Olson and D. Shoemaker cannot be right. In my opinion the claim that our persistence can be completely irrelevant to practical concerns is suspicious. Precisely because of the role that our referring to ourselves plays in our practical considerations. When I think of myself – the being which I refer to by the first-person pronoun – I think of the very thing that is the subject of personal identity debate. And there is a special function that this pronoun has in practical reasoning. So, there are some conceptual patterns that include the pronoun "I" and that are essentially related to practical topics such as moral responsibility or rational self-concern.

Let me elaborate on that. Many authors argue – correctly, in my opinion – that practical reasoning – that is deliberating on what to do in a given situation, based on one's own beliefs and desires or values – requires first-personal believes or thoughts (e.g. Perry

1979; Burge 1998; Bermudez 2017; and many others), or at least first-personal intentions (Babb 2016; Gjelsvik 2016). So when I am engaged in this kind of reasoning, I need to at least think of myself as the subject of intended action that I have taken into consideration or already chosen. In other words, one need to refer to oneself when engaging in deciding what to do. I am the subject of intended future action and I am the object of such intention. Thus, a referent of the pronoun "I" is a subject of practical reasoning, an object of formulated intentions, and also a subject of intended actions. To put it another way, we are (rational or moral) agents (e.g. Bratman 2000; Baker 2011; Ferrero 2022), at least for a certain period of our existence – when we use "I" and make practical decisions and so on. Then our identity over time during this period is practically important diachronic relation. The pronoun "I" refers to an earlier individual who decided upon later action and also to an individual who then performed the intended action, and to a later individual who possibly experiences intended effects of that action. Even if one claims (following Parfit) that the relation which grounds our persistence can branch in time (cease to be one-to-one), one also should see this relation, according to my argument, as practically important because in cases when it is actually one-to-one it grounds diachronic identity of individual who may be rational or moral agent, a subject of moral responsibility or rational self-concern.

4 Summary

In conclusion, I think that personal identity is diachronic identity of a referent of the first-person pronoun and, then, diachronic identity of an (rational, moral) agent. So, the antecedent of Eklund's conditional thesis is satisfied. This means that relation which constitutes my identity cannot be practically irrelevant. Therefore, views on personal identity cannot be ethically neutral: they should agree with at least some ethical assumptions, e.g. our intuitions about morality or rationality. But it implies that these views can be controversial in this aspect. And this is the precondition of ethical arguments in the personal identity debate that I was looking for.

There is an additional consequence of what I have said. Different views on our identity conditions are correlated with distinct views on our nature or essence. I have argued that the link between personal identity and the first-person pronoun fixes the subject of the debate on our persistence, and that this is the basis for ethical importance of this

topic. Therefore, potentially controversial ethical consequences of views on personal identity may translate into controversies regarding corresponding views on our nature.

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