PART III

IDENTITY

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The Fact that $x = y$ (1987)

The central objection raised by Cook in 'Difference at Origin'[1] against the position advocated by Hugh Chandler and me seems to depend on the plausible and philosophically popular metaphysical thesis that, where x is a possible individual from a possible world w_1 and y is a possible individual from a possible world w_2, if $x = y$ then there must be something in the qualitative nature of x and y, as they are in these worlds, that makes this so, some fact about the qualitative character of x in w_1 and y in w_2 in virtue of which they are identical. This thesis (which is one of various theses that go by the name 'anti-haecceitism') is false. In fact, despite its popularity and *prima facie* appeal, precisely the opposite is (virtually) provable: where x is a possible individual from a possible world w_1 and y is a possible individual from a possible world w_2, if $x = y$ then there is no fact about their qualitative character (as they are in these worlds) in virtue of which this is so, and there is nothing in the qualitative nature of x and y, other than their mere possible existence, that makes them identical. For surely there is no qualitative fact about x, other than the fact of its possible existence, in virtue of which $x = x$. That is, x is such that there is nothing in its qualitative character (in any possible world) that makes x identical with it. It follows by Leibniz's Law that if $x = y$, then y is also such that there is nothing in its qualitative character that makes x identical with it. Therefore, if $x = y$, then there is nothing in x's, i.e. y's, qualitative character that makes $x = y$. *Q.E.D.*

The very same proof applies *mutatis mutandis* against an almost universally accepted thesis which underlies the great bulk of the extant philosophical literature on identity over time with regard to artifacts and persons (and which might be called 'transtemporal anti-haecceitism'). This is the metaphysical thesis that, where x is a (past, present, or future) individual from a time t_1 and y is a (past, present, or future) individual from a later time t_2, if $x = y$ then there must be some qualitative transtemporal relation between x at t_1 and y at t_2 that makes this so, some transtemporal facts about x and y in virtue of which they are identical—such as facts concerning spatiotemporally 'continuous' or gradual transitional change linking x to y during the period from t_1 to t_2, where x and y are physical objects, or facts concerning y's memories and continuation of past experiences that connect with x, where x and y are persons. No such transtemporal facts ground the identity of x with itself. Hence, if $x = y$, then y must be like x in the respect that no such transtemporal facts ground x's identity with it.

[1] This issue, pp. 126–132.

These conclusions are not as strange as they may appear. If $x \neq y$, then there is no such thing as the (possible) *fact* that $x = y$. The fact that $x = y$, if such a thing is indeed a *fact*, is just the fact that $x = x$. These are the very same fact, described two different ways. Described as 'the fact that $x = x$', it is quite obvious that this fact obtains solely in virtue of logic and logic's applicability to x, and not in virtue of any further fact concerning the possible qualitative character or history of x. The same thing is true of this fact (even if it is less obvious) when it is described as 'the fact that $x = y$', assuming there is such a (possible) fact.[2]

[2] The letters 'x' and 'y' are, of course, free variables throughout. The proofs apply no matter what values are assigned to these variables. The proofs can be extended unaltered to cases in which the variables are replaced with individual constants, indexicals, pronouns, or proper names (or any combination), but not to cases in which one (or both) of the variables is replaced with a definite description, because of a needed restriction on substitutivity (via Leibniz's Law or 'λ'-conversion) in such cases. For further relevant details see my 'Modal Paradox: Parts and Counterparts, Points and Counterpoints,' in P. French, T. Uehling, and H. Wettstein, eds., *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XI: Studies in Essentialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 75–120, and especially in the appendix thereto, at pp. 110–113.