The subject of personal identity has again become a topic of rich discussion in academic philosophy. The advancement of computer technology has brought machinery to the complex stage where a computer can perform incredibly advanced calculations. Computers can now be voice-activated, which gives them the status of being able to converse with their operators. Philosophers have considered the thesis of whether or not computers are persons, for they can engage in many of the actions once attributed only to human beings.

Also, advancements in biomedical technology have enabled scientists to clone sheep, with the potential to someday do the same to humans. Already advances in genetics have permitted scientists to structure the type of biological material required to reproduce certain types of human babies. The ethics of whether or not a person should be technologically created has become an issue in the biomedical community. Life-sustaining methods have further enabled us to keep gravely ill people alive who would have been dead earlier in their lives without this technology. The controversial question whether or not a human being who has only minimal mental and physical abilities could still enjoy all the rights of those whose capacities are not diminished entails whether or not diminished capacity disqualifies one as a person. Biomedical questions and the ethics of intervention in the medical community turn on deciding what aggregate of concepts make up a person. Therefore, as the technology enables us to become more and better equipped to perform incredible feats of progress, the issue of whether or not a person is affected by our activities must be made clearer by a full determination of what is a human person.

This module is designed to treat the question of what is the essential set of qualities that make up a human person. I concede that while nonhuman persons are possible, and will become more possible as our scientific skills
increase, nonhuman persons will have different rights and privileges than human persons, because nonhuman persons are a different sort of creature than human persons. What will be helpful in endorsing this thesis is to determine what human persons are that nonhuman persons cannot be or become. If we can ascertain that there is a difference between human and nonhuman persons, the marks of difference will hold a key to the type of identity that is termed personal identity. Also, at present, nonhuman persons are largely science fictions. Robots may do much of the labor of human persons, but are easily distinguishable in their appearance from human persons. For the sake of dealing with the most representative cases on the subject, this module will focus on human persons exclusively.

In the history of Western philosophy, the question of the nature of personal identity goes back to Plato and Aristotle. Plato saw humans as inferior duplications of eternal forms created by the divine progenitor the Demiourgos. Aristotle made the claim that the individual substance called a man was a combination of matter, form and soul. His claim is that once one separates the body (matter) from the soul, you no longer have a person. Upon such a separation, what results are a disembodied spirit and a dead human body.

One of the more fruitful periods of writing on the subject was the era of modern philosophy. By the end of this period, generally accepted as the death of Immanuel Kant in 1804, two major theories had been established as classical approaches to the question. The first theory that has its roots in Aristotelian thinking is the bodily identity theory.

The bodily identity theory depicts a person as necessarily a human body with other attributes accessory to it such as a soul. A person can be described as a human body displaying the ability to act. One person lives a life and performs actions in a body that remains roughly similar in appearance throughout history, suffering only the changes of aging. If I am of advanced years, and remember an action that had taken place years prior, the confirmation that I was the person who performed the action was that I have memories of a body more youthful yet similar to mine doing the action in the past. In order to have a memory of an action I am able to mentally picture someone I call myself performing the action. In this mental picture is a human body in action. The strict bodily identity theory also includes the notion that my body has always performed my actions in my continued history. If I have memories of performing an action as another body, those memories cannot be genuine. I can only be the body that I am, and not the body I that imagine I am.
The bodily identity theory does not discount the worth of an accessory consciousness that is part of the definition of a person. However, if I am conscious of my history as a person, I am conscious of a string of events that have taken place with myself present. If I claim I am present at these events in my history, my body can confirm such a claim. This theory has appeal because it can claim that a person can be identified by the same method that we can identify the extended history of any object. We tend to identify if an object we presently see is the same as a previous perception of it by whether or not the object fundamentally maintains its same appearance over time. For example, a building can be renovated, remodeled, and painted, but the original essential structure was and still is a building. Even though there may be numerous replacements of its physical constituents, there are still some common structural elements that persist about the building in its history unless the building is completely razed. The building is still a building. Similarly under this theory, people are only more complex objects. The exact nature of a person that remains, even after radical changes, is their body. Even though the body can be remodeled, reshaped and even regendered, a person who goes through such cosmetic overhaul is still the body he or she was at birth.

The body identity theory claims the body as necessary although not sufficient in determining the nature of personal identity. However, it is clear that in order to be a human person as we are accustomed to speak of them, one must be the owner of a human body.

The second major theory that can be described as a classical approach to solving the question of personal identity is the continued consciousness theory. The continued consciousness theory depicts a person as necessarily a string of memories that need not necessarily be attached to any one particular body. Therefore, I am a surviving set of experiences that I can recall as my own. Under this theory, personal identity is not as important as survival. A person has memories of performing various actions they can call their own and are conscious of performing such actions. The fact they are conscious of these performances contributes to the plausibility that they did the action. The continued consciousness theory also includes the notion that my consciousness has moments of lapses and changes, to the degree that one could speak of many different streams of consciousness in a lifetime.

The continued consciousness theory does not place ultimate importance on questions of personal identity. That is, it is not necessary to establish what makes up a person, because any question that is philosophically necessary
dealing with the issue of personal identity is really a disguised question about the nature of human consciousness. Survival and emergence are concepts that matter more than identity. Antagonists to this theory contend that while a person is a continued consciousness, such a thing requires a working brain, and therefore personal identity is still bound with a physical component. One response may be that the continued consciousness theory requires only that a conscious set of memories be present in a brain, without necessarily being present in any particular brain over a sustained period. The memories in my consciousness are the important continued element of myself, not the vessel in which they are stored. I may be a human brain in a human body, or a brain in a vat, but as long as I have a continued string of memories of my conscious history, what matters about me still survives.

The continued consciousness theory of personal identity has appeal for two reasons. First, the clinical definition of death in Western medicine pertains to the length of time that a human body does not display electrical impulses in the brain. If the brain is not functioning, it is impossible for the human to be conscious. Permanent loss of consciousness is connected with loss of life. Second, the continued consciousness theory entails the fact that we are aware only of whom we claim to be. If all of my memories were to be destroyed, and if I had been transformed into having all the memories of Saul Kripke, I would go about my life insisting I were Saul Kripke. I am the person my mind tells me that I am, and I am steadfast in this claim until possibly consistent evidence from others informs me otherwise. (Such as meeting the real Saul Kripke, his wife, their children, and his colleagues, who insist the real Professor Kripke is Professor Kripke and I am not). I am aware only of being Saul Kripke. Further, others’ insistence on the real identity of Saul Kripke is based upon their conscious understanding of a certain individual to be the real Kripke.

The continued consciousness theory describes conscious memories as the necessary quality that a person would wish to keep over and above any other possibilities. The theory also claims emotional appeal. Philosophers of the continued consciousness theory claim that a person surely would want to survive as a series of memories in some body (even a body not previously their own) rather than suffer death and total annihilation. This theory has its roots in the philosophy of John Locke. Locke first traces the interesting possibilities of memory transference in his prince/cobbler case.

Locke considers a scenario where a prince had his consciousness transferred to the body of a cobbler and vice versa. If we were able to perform
such an operation, would the prince be the person with the body of the cobbler and the prince’s memories, or would he be the person with the body of the prince and the cobbler’s memories? Whoever had the same consciousness of the present and past actions is the same person to whom they both belong. Therefore the prince is the person in the cobbler’s body and has the memories of being the prince before the mental transfer. From this observation we can conclude that the same body could become different persons. From the story of the prince and the cobbler we have the humble beginnings of the questions that deal with consciousness that departs from the body and maintains all its memories. If this hypothetical were possible, at the very least we would seriously question the bodily identity theory, and define persons as fundamentally connected to their conscious experiences. Locke lays the groundwork for the continued consciousness theory.

Upon reflection of both the bodily identity theory and the continued consciousness theory, we are led to the difficult conclusion that the true criteria for what is called personal identity are not established. The bodily identity theory emphasizes the need for a body to define a person, but the body alone is not sufficient to define a person. Other unknown criteria may be necessary. The continued consciousness theory discounts the importance of personal identity, as survival is necessary and sufficient for the continuance of the most essential aspect of me. However, that aspect is not necessarily synonymous to the identity of persons. These reflections give rise to a third approach to the answer to this question, borne out of the skepticism of David Hume.

In short, Hume argued that there was no such thing as personal identity because there is no self without an accompanying impression or idea. Personal identity is a fiction and is therefore only a pseudo-question in philosophy. “When I enter most intimately into what I call myself I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.” (*Treatise* Book I, Part 4, Chapter 6). In agreement with such a position comes forth a modified version of the theory that claims personal identity to be a question bound by too many metaphysical problems to be considered answerable. The appeal to such an approach may be for the same reasons that any metaphysical question is out of philosophic consideration. Metaphysical questions cannot be answered with the type of indisputable proof philosophers generally find necessary. Verifiability of any claims about personal identity as universal claims is impossible to establish. An objection to this approach may be that
we can still approximate a set of persistent criteria that generally establish
the existence of a person in most cases. While this set of persistent criteria is
not universal, it may approximate determining all but the logically possible
puzzle case boundaries of the definition of personal identity. Such a defini-
tion by nature will not be complete, but may be sufficient for us to continue
to be able to use the concept of personal identity in adjudicating moral dis-
putes. The concept of personal identity can be saved to the degree that one
can engage in a type of metaphysical realism and identify the persistent
natures of fundamental persons.

If we can continue to deploy such realism that would be necessary in a
philosophically fruitful discussion of personal identity, certain questions can
be solved. Various potential descriptions of persons are possible under a real-
ist contention. Consider which of these are still the same persons assuming
our subject, Kelley, is presently a human person. What if

(a) Kelley loses her memory, completely and permanently, but her body
K remains?
(b) Kelley turns into a mermaid, but retains her memories as a human
being?
(c) Kelley turns into a monkey, and also loses her memories as a human
being?
(d) K (Kelley’s Body) disintegrates before your eyes, but her voice con-
tinues to speak?
(e) After K disappears before your eyes, another body (or a replica of K)
returns next year, complete with Kelley’s memory and personality?
(f) (e) occurs, but K reappears equipped with memories of being
Suzanne, a different person, for the past year?

The different ways in which one can describe the future of persons
entails the realistic (a), the fantastic (c), and the logically possible (b), (d),
(e), and (f). Those who have written on the question of personal identity
have considered all of these possibilities and more. The benefit in reckoning
an answer to the question is in the understanding of what changes necessar-
ily disqualify an individual as a person, so that moral obligations no longer
pertain to them, or ought to pertain to them under unusual circumstances of
identity change. In other words, once my subject Kelley ceases to exist as a
person, she loses a certain moral status as a being with whom I am con-
cerned. Her survival can be morally placed in the decision-making of custo-
dians, or it may be assessed that she no longer survives at all. She has fullest rights and privileges in a community as long as she is a person. In the examples above, she is (a) a person with a brand new history to build, (b) a creature that no longer continues her history as a person, (c) no longer a person but an animal, (d) a disembodied person, which some consider not to be a person, (e) not the same person as she was last year, but an exactly similar person to who she was. However, in case (e) it is incorrect to claim she is who she was. (f) She is still the same person, with a stage of being the now nonexistent Suzanne. These are all my determinations on the outcomes of these different alterations of personal identity. Philosophers have described all these types of cases as ways that personal identity is retained. The question is problematic, but our true nature depends upon how it is answered. Puzzle (a) above is representative of what matters for the bodily identity theory. Puzzles (b), (d), and (f) above are representative of what matters to sustain a person under the continued consciousness theory. Cases (c) and (e) above are supportive of the view Hume originally discussed. They challenge the reader to deny that the once-Kelley, now a monkey is not a person, even though it has lived years of a person’s life. If Kelley disappeared for a year (e) and returns with memories intact of her life except for that missing year, we cannot deny that she is a person. She is living the life and making the history of another person, yet she disappears for years at a time, which is not typical of a person. The contention in the metaphysical impossibility of persons is also that everything one can attribute to personal identity can be attributed to other real or hypothetical beings. With this theory, the special quality of personal identity cannot be traced. We can speak of Kelley as a person, but this theory leaves us in the awkward position of being always uncertain of whom we speak.

This text will examine the concept of human persons, and will present representatives from all three standard views of personal identity. The question of who we are or what we are matters not only in a psychological sense, but also the philosophical observations we make on the identity of persons have some relevance to the way in which these beings are treated in adjudicating moral disputes. Whether or not there is a sure answer to the question of the identity of persons, it is nonetheless a real question, as confirmed by the authoritative voices in this text.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING


