

### Essay Question:

*What thought experiments concerning body-duplication show us that the concept of personal identity is ultimately dispensable.*

### Essay Answer:

Personal identity can be defined as the unique set of properties that define 'I' or my unique self. Properties that include ones memories, thoughts, emotions and perceptions as experienced through our sensory capabilities.

If therefore, my personal identity is unique, could my identity be duplicated and if so what would be the criteria for duplicating? Would this body-duplication actually create another version of 'I' or a separate identity to 'I' altogether?

What about my mind? Can my mind be duplicated. If the mind is viewed as being supervenient to the brain, then a materialist might argue that by duplicating the brain, one could duplicate the mind. Therefore if we are our minds, then duplicating our brains could enable our selves to be duplicated.

What therefore constitutes a self? Does a self even exist?

17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher John Locke in *An essay concerning Human Understanding* observes that memory is essential to self and through our memories, our sense of self is preserved. If I recall myself as a 5 year old boy learning to ride a bicycle, in spite of me now being a 45 year old man, Locke would argue that I have a clear sense of my 45 year old self and that 5 year old boy being the same person through the bank of memories throughout my life.

Thomas Reid however, argues that memory alone is not sufficient to define the self in Reid's thought experiment of the general who loses memory of his life as a sentinel whilst being able to recall his life as a child. If memory is a criterion, then the general and the soldier are not the same identity but the general and the boy are by virtue of the memory link. Hence, the break in the continuity of memories poses a conundrum in identity being contingent on the flow of memory.

Philosophers discuss the importance of numerical and qualitative identity in the role of preserving personal identity. Numerical identity posits that because there is numerically only one of me, my thoughts, my memories and emotions all housed in one mind and body, that by definition I am unique. Qualitative identity refers to the particular function I fulfil by virtue of unique of qualities or properties. Therefore whilst I may physically change over time, my cells replaced, my body may grow or wither with age, because my function as a person remains consistent over time, my identity is also preserved. Thomas Hobbes provides the thought experiment of Theseus Ship which on the voyage back to Athens, had each of its timbers replaced so that upon arrival, the ship structure had been fully replaced. What preserved the ships identity therefore was the function or purpose of the ship, namely to the enable Theseus to complete his voyage.

Peter van Inwagen describes the experiment of the house made of Lego bricks to illustrate the importance of the causal chain in identity. A child makes a brick house and leaves the room. Whilst he is gone, his house gets knocked over by his sister. His dad then rebuilds the house in exactly the same configuration, placing every brick in exactly its same former spot, therefore a qualitative duplicate. Van Inwagen argues that the house is not identical as the causal chain, namely who made the house has been broken because the dad made the second house whilst the boy made the first house.

So far, we have discussed the need for continuity, purpose or function and causal connection as key criteria in defining identity.

In the case of body duplication, is it possible to fulfil the above criteria in the absence of numerical identity?

If I could duplicate my body, would my 'identity' also be duplicated and if so, does this itself make the concept of identity redundant?

How might I go about successfully duplicating myself?

Robert Nozick proposes a theory called the closest continuer theory whereby the identity that most closely resembles my mind and body is the closest identity. If I could ensure that the existential gap between my 'current self' and 'future self' is minimised then the issue of personal identity is resolved as long as my genetic information, thoughts and memories transfer without or with minimal disruption. The thought experiment of the importance of timing my 'death' properly empathises the importance of close continuity. If I die before the scheduled transfer then I am not transferring my full self as a portion of my life has been left out and given my identity is partly defined by the continuity and persistence of memory, I will not have been fully duplicated. On the other hand, if I live beyond the scheduled date, then I would need to kill myself in order to survive. This thought experiment served to illustrate the subjectivity in preserving identity.

A form of body preservation offered today is cryonics. Cryonics is the process of freezing one's body just before death whereby the blood of one's body is drained and replaced by liquid nitrogen. The body is then frozen and preserved in the hope that one's body can thawed out and cured of illness at some time in the future. The question is whether you would be the same person upon awakening? Philosopher Peter Unger argues that the closest solution to solving bodily continuity is whilst a cryopreserved brain would now generate mentality whilst frozen, it may have the capability to generate thoughts and perhaps recall memories unique to one's identity upon being thawed out.

The perspectives outlined above serve to illustrate that the matter of personal identity

is not as clear cut as we might like to believe. We may view ourselves as unique in mind and body however once we start to look closely at what constitutes identity, we can find ourselves unpacking this criteria to discover that perhaps the concept of personal identity is not as unique as we might have formerly thought.