

Edited by

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# **JUST THE ARGUMENTS**

# **100**

**of the Most  
Important  
Arguments  
in Western  
Philosophy**

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## Split-Case Arguments about Personal Identity

*Ludger Jansen*

Parfit, Derek. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.  
Shoemaker, Sydney, and Richard Swinburne. *Personal Identity (Great Debates in Philosophy)*. Oxford: Blackwell 1984.

In the empiricist tradition, it is a common move to account for the diachronic identity of a person in terms of shared mental properties or continuity of memories (e.g., Locke) or in terms of shared matter, especially of the brain. But all these criteria allow for “split cases,” that is, for two or more candidates fulfilling the requirements, which cause trouble with the formal properties of the identity relation (i.e., reflexivity, symmetry, and transitivity). For example, a brain can be divided and both halves implanted in different bodies: which of these, if any, is the same person as the original one? Two individuals could even share most of their memories – but this does not make them the same person. Thus, none of these criteria can be the decisive factor for personal identity. Some philosophers, such as Richard Swinburne (#24), argue for dualism and conclude that there must be some immaterial factor, the soul, that accounts for personal identity. Others, such as Derek Parfit, conclude that we should discard the concept of personal identity altogether and rather replace it with a nonsymmetric successor relation that allows for such split cases.

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There are no logical difficulties in supposing that we could transplant one of [a person]  $P_1$ 's [brain] hemispheres into the skull from which a brain had been removed, and the other hemisphere into another such skull, and that both transplants should take, and it may well be practically possible to do so. [...] If these transplants took, clearly each of the resulting persons would behave to some extent like  $P_1$ , and indeed both would probably have some of the apparent memories of  $P_1$ . Each of the resulting persons would then be good candidates for being  $P_1$ . After all, if one of  $P_1$ 's hemispheres had been destroyed and the other remained intact and untransplanted, and the resulting person continued to behave and make memory claims somewhat like those of  $P_1$ , we would have had little hesitation in declaring that person to be  $P_1$ . The same applies, whichever hemisphere was preserved [...]. But if it is, that other person will be just as good a candidate for being  $P_1$ . [...] But [...] that cannot be – since the two persons are not identical with each other. (Shoemaker and Swinburne, 15)

- P1.  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  are two distinct persons.
- P2. At  $t_2 > t_1$ ,  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  are such that each of  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  share exactly the same amount of the X that A had at  $t_1$ .
- P3. X is the decisive factor for personal identity (e.g., body mass, brain mass, memories, character traces), that is, for any persons  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  and any times  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , if  $A_2$  has at  $t_2$  most of the X that  $A_1$  had at  $t_1$ , then  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  are the same person (assumption for *reductio*).
  - C1.  $A_1$  is the same person as A (*modus ponens*, P3, P2).
  - C2.  $A_2$  is the same person as A (*modus ponens*, P3, P2).
- P4. If X is the same person as Y, then Y is the same person as X (symmetry of identity).
  - C3. A is the same person as  $A_2$  (*modus ponens*, P4, C2).
- P5. If  $A_1$  is the same person as A and A is the same person as  $A_2$ , then A is the same person as  $A_2$  (transitivity, C1, C3).
  - C4.  $A_1$  is the same person as  $A_2$  (*modus ponens*, conjunction, P5, C1, C3).
  - C5. No such X can be the decisive factor for personal identity (*reductio*, P1–C4).