26. DISEMBODIED MINDS AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT. Discussion of the human soul has bulked large in the literature of philosophy and religion. I defend the possibility of disembodied Cartesian minds by examining the criticisms of three philosophers who argue that there are serious difficulties about any attempt to account for the identity of such Cartesian minds through time. I argue that their criticisms of the possibility of disembodied minds are damaging but not fatal. I hold that the central issue behind their criticisms of Cartesian minds is whether any nonphysical mental criterion can be formulated for the identity of such entities. Even though no such criterion can be given, disembodied minds that persist through time remain logical possibilities.

Three distinguished philosophers—Peter Strawson, Terence Penelhum, and Derek Parfit—have given arguments against the existence of disembodied Cartesian minds based on considerations about personal identity. I shall rebut their arguments. Although I see no convincing reason to believe there are disembodied Cartesian minds, I think they are distinct logical possibilities. I will defend this possibility against these arguments because I do not think the arguments hold any water.

P.F. Strawson gives a very typical criticism of Cartesian dualism and disembodied minds. He says that in order to be able to reidentify individual items of any kind, we must first be able to identify them. In order to identify any given item, we must have a way of individuating items of that kind; we must know when we have one such item rather than two. Cartesian dualists, however, hold that the concept of a mind is genuinely independent of talk about a person, a human being or a man. For a Cartesian, the concept of a mind is not dependent on the concept of a person the way talk of surfaces is dependent on the concept of a material object. It is essential to Cartesianism "that the application of the notions of identity and numerability of souls (consciousness) should not be determined by their application to persons." ¹ We know how to apply the concepts of identity and difference to individual human beings, but the Cartesian cannot rely on this since, "the concept of the identity of a soul or consciousness over time is not derivative from, dependent upon, the concept of the iden-
tity of person over time". The Cartesian must either admit that the concepts of identity and difference of minds are derivative from the concepts of identity and difference of human beings, or supply us with an independently intelligible account of the individuation and identity of Cartesian minds. The former amounts to giving up Cartesian dualism. The latter cannot be done since no mental criteria for personal identity are sufficient of themselves. Therefore, Cartesian dualism and talk about disembodied minds is mistaken.

I shall consider Strawson's criticism as it pertains only to the real possibility of disembodied minds. The main point is that we lack any way of identifying and individuating disembodied minds. There would be no way to pick out some other disembodied mind A rather than B because there is no observation we could make to show we have one mind A rather than B. The knowledge we could in principle have of the identity of any disembodied mind would have to depend on our ability to identify and reidentify such entities, and the identification of a disembodied mind requires that we be able to pick out or individuate such an entity. But there does not seem to be any way of individuating Cartesian minds which would allow us to identify them for they do not occupy space. One might say that two distinct disembodied minds are distinct because they have different mental histories, but this will not help us pick out one mind from another. Since the identity of disembodied minds over time depends on being able to identify them, there is no reason to think any account of the identity of disembodied minds may be given.

The criticism is not just dependent on the impossibility of having any physical means of identification for disembodied minds. A disembodied mind might appear to us in the guise of a fire or vary its appearance in different mediums such as a voice, a beam of light, and so on. The difficulty is one of knowing that it is one disembodied mind A rather than B which appears to us this way (since the Cartesian mind and its properties itself never appear to us even when embodied), and knowing it is the same mind which appears to us now one way and now another.

If we assumed that a disembodied Cartesian mind can act on, or initiate change in, the physical world, then we still may be able to formulate a criterion for the identity of minds. However, if we fail we cannot conclude that the account of the identity of disembodied minds is impossible in principle. We may still be able to know of the identity of such minds in some other way. Such a way of knowing the identity of disembodied minds can be made intelligible by considering the notion of a "criterion" for personal identity construed in terms of necessary evidence.

It is reasonable to believe that memory claims, when sincere and confident, count as a criterion for personal identity because it is inconceivable that a memory claim made by a person should be irrelevant as evidence for his identity, or that his memory claims would not count as evidence for his identity. It is necessarily true that a person's sincere and confident memory reports made about his past history count as some evidence for his past identity. This way of telling whether memory claims are criteria for personal identity involves asking ourselves whether we can imagine a case where sincere and confident memory statements could ever fail to carry some presumption that the person who utters such statements is identical with a certain past
DISEMBODIED MINDS AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

self. This method of deciding whether memory statements count as necessary evidence for personal identity, which has become well known in the literature of personal identity, can be applied to disembodied minds. In this sense of "criterion" it seems that a disembodied mind could speak to us through a medium, or out of blue, and make a memory claim to be a certain person. Suppose we hear a voice that says or asserts that he is a certain person we knew in the past; the person thereby identifies himself as being a certain person we knew in the past and previously identified. It would seem, off hand, that his claim or assertion that he is identical with a certain person we previously identified could not fail to be evidence that he is the person. Certainly we would be inclined to place as much weight on the memory statements of disembodied minds as we would on memory statements made by embodied persons.

Sydney Shoemaker has argued that memory is a criterion for personal identity in a more complicated and careful way. He gives some arguments for the necessary truth that sincere and confident memory statements are generally true. If so, inferences of the form, "He claims to remember doing x, so he probably did x", are noninductive and memory claims are criteria for personal identity. If all of what Shoemaker says in support of this is adequate (and I am inclined to think there are some serious problems here), one might be able to argue, in a similar way, that it is a necessary truth that sincere and confident memory claims made by a disembodied mind are usually true. Whether Shoemaker is correct and whether or not it is a conceptual truth that honest and confident assertions by people that they are identical with people previously identified are generally correct, I think enough has been said to dispel the view that it is impossible to give an account of the identity of another disembodied mind. Thus, Strawson is not justified in concluding that there is no reason to think any account can be given of the identity of an individual consciousness or a disembodied Cartesian mind.

Strawson is open to just this criticism since he says we can conceive of disembodiment in a secondary way, derivative from our existence and identity as a person with physical properties. He seems to think that personal identity, once established, has a kind of inertia that can keep it intact even after physical properties have dropped away. Thus my criticism is at least consistent with what Strawson himself says.

Let us now turn to what is apparently a more serious difficulty for disembodied minds based on considerations about our knowledge of personal identity. Terence Penelhum has an even more basic attack on the notion of disembodied minds. It is based on difficulties in saying we have the same disembodied mind at different times. His criticism is not based on the problem of identification and individuation of Cartesian minds, but more directly on considerations necessary for speaking of the identity of any item through time. The cogent part of Penelhum's attack stems from his application of Shoemaker's arguments that there is a sense in which bodily identity is the most fundamental criterion for personal identity. The most basic consideration is the way in which memory depends on local bodily identity in order to be used as a criterion for personal identity. In order to recognize people's personal memory claims, we must be able to identify and recognize them in a bodily way over a long enough period of time to organize and understand their memory
claims. This requires some bodily way of telling that we are conversing with the same person which is independent of memory.

In addition, for disembodied minds, we will also need bodily identity to show that a person is using words like "remember" correctly and as the most fundamental way of distinguishing correct and incorrect memory claims. This is because there can be no reidentification of any physicalistic realization of memories in disembodied minds. The effect of this is to make the memory criterion for self-identity even more dependent on bodily identity. In this way Penelhum shows us where Shoemaker's arguments have a special application to the identity of disembodied minds.

The arguments do seem to show that there will be some insurmountable difficulties in deciding whether memory statements are reliable criteria for the identity of disembodied minds, since there will be no way for us to check whether such disembodied minds make veridical memory statements or are even using the relevant terms correctly. Thus if we are to use such criteria we would have to accept them on blind faith. However, Penelhum draws an even stronger conclusion. He says that without the availability of physical tests for memory, plus the impossibility of using memory as the sole criterion for personal identity, there can be no reason for applying the concept of personal identity to disembodied minds. It is unintelligible to speak of the identity of disembodied people. I think he means it is unintelligible in the sense that to say a disembodied spirit persists and is self-identical is nothing more than empty gesture. We really have no usable or applicable way of talking about the identity of a disembodied person. But even if we do not accept this strong conclusion, we can see that considerations about personal identity do raise difficulties for proponents of disembodied minds.

Another qualification has to be made to put these difficulties in perspective. These objections have been raised from a third-person point of view, in terms of the knowledge we have of the identity of disembodied minds other than our own. But Penelhum ignores what can be said about the identity of disembodied minds from a first-person point of view. Each of us is aware of his or her own identity without being aware of anything going on in our bodies. By induction, it seems possible that this self-awareness of one's own identity could continue in a disembodied state. Penelhum merely assumes, without any argument, that we need a third-person account of the identity of disembodied minds for there to be an intelligible application of the concept of personal identity. But one might argue that it is sufficient for a coherent account of personal identity if we can make it plausible to suppose that a person existing as a disembodied mind could be aware of his own identity with some pre-mortem person. Strawson has said that within our conceptual scheme each of us can quite intelligibly conceive of our survival of death in a disembodied form. But he points out that a disembodied individual so conceived "is strictly solitary, and it must remain for him an empty, though not meaningless, speculation, as to whether there are any other members of his class".

The issue is whether the existence of only private data and the absence of any possibility of having any public, intersubjective data for personal identity will be enough to render the notion of the identity of disembodied people intelligible. It is
not clear that this issue has to be decided against restricting personal identity to each individual's private consciousness or memory of his own identity. The only reason I can see for saying this is incoherent is to invoke some form of the verifiability criterion of meaningfulness with all the difficulties that has. 8

There are other issues here. One can question whether having criteria for personal identity is necessary for the application or use of the concept. Do we need the possibility of criterial evidence for all our knowledge? If so, how is this assertion to be defended? If not, then what is the differentiation between those cases where we do require such knowledge and those cases where we do not (and why is the identity of disembodied minds not a member of the latter class of cases?) I will not go into this epistemological thicket. I think it is clear at this juncture that there are some problems with the application of our usual criteria for personal identity to disembodied minds, but I think that we can make the logical possibility of disembodied minds intelligible.

At this point someone who is sympathetic to Penelhum's views on disembodied minds can plausibly argue that I have not addressed myself to the central issue: What sort of criterion for the identity of Cartesian minds can be formulated that does not rest in some way on physical entities or attributes? This seems to be the most fundamental issue that both Strawson and Penelhum deny can be solved. I have claimed that their arguments based on considerations about personal identity fail to provide any logical barrier to the possibility of disembodied Cartesian minds. But I have not addressed myself to the central issue which lurks in the background.

First of all, I doubt that anyone can provide a criterion for disembodied minds which is nonphysical in nature because a criterion is, by definition, an intersubjectively confirmable phenomenon. This is one of the concepts or marks of the physical that has been proposed in the literature. Thus a "nonphysical criterion" is a contradiction in terms. But this does not prevent someone from drawing an inference from the use of a criterion. Consider the following scenario.

Suppose I am in an airplane that goes down over a desert. I am alone and I have reason to believe that by walking for five hours I will reach civilization. I walk for three hours in the hot sun and I have every reason to believe I am still in full possession of my faculties. I clearly and distinctly hear a voice utter the following words in everyday English: "By traveling in the direction of two o'clock for about a mile and a half you will find water." I make the appropriate change in direction and after walking for twenty minutes I find water. What are we to make of this situation? Well, for one thing it is untoward in the extreme. Surely I will want to consider some alternative explanations of the source of the voice I heard. The most plausible explanation might be some kind of precognition or human telepathy. Another possible explanation is, of course, God (an unembodied spirit). But, I submit, one other possible explanation is that another disembodied mind of a particular person was speaking to me. I am only arguing that this is logically possible or intelligible, not that there is any reason to believe it.
The point I am making here is that, contrary to what Penelhum and Shoemaker argue, the human body is not a necessary condition for identifying the memory reports of another mind or person. In an article on other minds, H.H. Price argued that evidence for the presence of another mind does not require a human body. Price gives the example of a talking tree. Price says that if we hear a voice coming from some object within our hearing range, and the voice satisfies certain conditions, then we can conclude that we have evidence that the voice is animated by some mind other than ours. If the voice utters something that has a symbolic character for me, the sounds symbolize something true or false, and the information given is new to me, then I have evidence that the voice is produced by a mind other than my own. Then Price gives the following example. He says

... I am on a mountaintop, and I hear a voice saying that on the other side of such and such a rock there is a sheep-track which leads down the mountain. After the best search I can make, I find no organism from which the voice could have proceeded. However, I go back to the rock in question, and I do find a sheep-track which leads me down safely into the valley. Is it not clear that I should then have good evidence of the existence of another mind? The fact that so far as I can discover there was no organism, human or other, from which the voice proceeded makes no difference, provided I hear the noises, understand them, and verify the information which they convey. Now suppose I go up the mountain many times... but I never find an organism from which they could have proceeded, search as I may. I should then have reason for concluding that the place was "haunted" by an unembodied mind. Such things do not happen, no doubt. But still there is no contradiction whatever in supposing them... And this is sufficient to show that the presence of an observable organism is not essential... 10

This example given by Price is, I think, a possibility that we have to accede to. If so, it provides a counterexample to the Shoemaker-Penelhum line of argument stated above. Certainly, on the current dispensation, Penelhum is right. But Price is equally correct that we can imagine situations where Penelhum's criticisms of disembodied minds would not apply.

At this point some may raise what they consider to be a crucial objection. The voice I heard was a heard sound caused by physical soundwaves moving through the atmosphere. The voice was something physical and could have no nonphysical or disembodied cause. This is the traditional problem of interactionism: How can a nonphysical something cause a physical soundwave? I have no answer to this question and have to admit that it is mysterious. But it seems no more mysterious to me than other examples of causal interaction. Consider action at a distance or the movement of the tides in relation to the position of the moon. These examples of physical causation are no less mysterious, yet for all that we don't rule them out as unintelligible or logically impossible. Thus it seems to me that these problems do not pose any logical bar to the possibility of Cartesian minds. This brings me to the third section of the paper.
During an excellent discussion of personal identity in a recent book Derek Parfit embraces a criticism of Cartesian minds first made by Locke and Kant. It has since become standard fare and almost every opponent of Cartesian dualism has adopted it in one form or another. The argument goes something like this. Suppose that there are mental substances of Cartesian Egos. If there are, we are not aware of them. Since I am not aware of such a thing (and even if I were) we cannot know that such an entity continues to exist at different times. There might be a series of such entities that replace one another even though my experience is psychologically continuous. Memories and other psychological states might be passed from one to another like a baton in a relay race. Therefore we cannot know that these entities continue to exist since each can be replaced by another without our knowing it.\(^{11}\)

This objection has been used frequently. But seldom has it received any careful and critical reflection. Parfit says that the argument does not depend on the verificationist claim that only what we know can ever be true. Indeed he thinks there are conceivable circumstances where evidence for reincarnation could point to the existence of Cartesian Egos. But we do not have good evidence for the belief in reincarnation. So we can use the above argument to reject belief in Cartesian Egos.

I shall try to reply to this objection by pointing to something that is seldom considered in the literature where the argument is put forward. It is this. The same argument can be given against the identity through time of a material or physical thing. Locke's material substance or his "something I know not what" is subject to the same objection. We do not observe a material substratum or atoms and molecules. So how do we know that the substance which is this pencil I am using continues to exist? There might be series of such entities that are continuous to our observation. Physical properties could be passed on from one physical object to the next for all we know. Given the perceived spatio-temporal continuity of the pencil we would not know that one of these entities had been replaced by another. Therefore we cannot know that such entities as material substances continue to exist.

However, in the case of material substances we do assume that the same thing continues to exist at different times in most cases. How can we justify this assumption? I'm not sure I have to answer this to make good my reply. But here is an attempt anyway. I suggest that it is because of the continuity of a physical thing that we observe over time. Physical things don't change all at once, get replaced every few seconds, or pop in and out of existence. Changes in the properties of a physical thing are gradual and even when they are all encompassing, they are typical changes for that kind of physical thing. A physical thing is the same material substance because the observed properties exhibit this sort of continuity. It is this perceivable continuity that justifies our saying that a physical thing is identical at different times.

This suggests an analogous claim for mental substances or Cartesian Egos. We can assume that a mental substance is the same mental substance at different times when there is a continuity of the kind we expect in the psychological history of the person in question. When the changes in someone's experiences are coherent and continuous he is the same mental substance. If there remains any obstacles to making
good this claim about the identity of mental substances, there must be some parallel
difficulties in saying what evidence we do in fact use about the identity of physical sub-
stances. The only alternative is to give sufficient reason for demanding of mental sub-
stance identity something that we do not demand of physical substance identity.

Someone may conclude from this we should give up talk about mental sub-
stances and physical substances and talk instead of persons and physical objects to-
gether with their respective micro-structures. I have no quarrel with this way of talk-
ing. My point has been that the traditional way of talking, in terms of substances,
suffers from a lack of parity of reasoning between mental and physical substances. 12

ENDNOTES

1 P.F. Strawson, "Self, Mind, and Body", Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind,

2 Ibid., 94.

3 Sydney Shoemaker, Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity, Chapter 6, (Cornell
University Press, 1963), especially 229-36, 244-45.

4 The reader may not accept this interpretation of Strawson's view. If so, it
may be because he has the intuition that Cartesian disembodiment is doomed once it
is seen that we speak of Cartesian minds as mere abstractions from persons, not as
entities in their own right. Strawson's talk of a derivative account of disembodiment
may be an indication that he did not understand his own view. He writes as though he
is thinking in terms of diaphanous existence which could serve as the basis of a con-
tinuation of ordinary personal identity even after such identity has been established in
a publicly accessible manner.

5 Terence Penelhum, Survival and Disembodied Existence, Chapters 5 and 6,

6 Terence Penelhum, op. cit., 68.


8 It must be admitted that Penelhum has a point about what is a necessary
feature of the way that philosophers like Shoemaker use the term "criterion". For as
they use the term inter-subjective data are necessary for the application of criteria to
cases. It is not clear that anything weaker than this is in the offing for any notion of a
criterion, including a criterion for personal identity.


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