



Personal Identity Dialogue

Hannah Sherman

Hannah Sherman: Good evening everyone, my name is Hannah Sherman and I'm going to be talking to you tonight about—

Philosopher 1: Excuse me, who are you?

H: Oh I'm sorry, I mumble sometimes. I'm Hannah Sherman and—

P1: Yes, I heard you. But my question is, who is Hannah Sherman?

H: Oh, um, I guess I don't see where your confusion is.

P1: I'm asking you, what constitutes your identity? Identity is important; it's how one distinguishes oneself from others. It's simple and enduring. It lets us feel things like anticipation and excitement for the future or remorse and nostalgia for the past. So what distinguishes you from me? What makes you numerically the same person as you were when you were born? And how do we know that you will be the same person in front of us for the whole presentation?

H: Well, uh, what you see here in front of you, this is me, Hannah Sherman. And I'm going to be talking—

P2: So you are proposing that sameness of matter constitutes personal identity?

H: I guess, I mean I have had and will always have the same body for the rest of my life. And what else are we, other than our bodies?

P2: Then I presume you would also agree that every time you shed skin cells you lose a part of yourself. Or that if you lost a limb and received a prosthetic, you would become an entirely new person.

H: No, I wouldn't say that. In those situations I would still have the majority of my original body left.

P2: So you want to say that there is a crucial percentage of original matter that needs to remain in order to retain your identity. I think that's just implausible.

H: Listen, I'm not here to talk about this. I'm here to talk about—

P2: Let me give you an example. Let us say that Theseus's ship needs repairing. He docks it and asks for all the damaged planks to be replaced with new ones. The repairman replaces one plank and returns the ship to Theseus. Is it the same ship?

H: Of course.

P2: What if he had replaced two planks?

H: Yes, it's still the same ship. Can we move on, I—

P2: Well then, we can continue this process until the repairman has replaced all the old planks with new ones. And you would have to say that this ship, with all new planks, is still Theseus's same ship.

H: Well, no, because it's made of entirely new matter.

P2: But now you're being inconsistent. What is the difference between replacing one or two planks, and replacing them all? At what point is the ship no longer Theseus's ship? Any number of planks that you tell me will be just an arbitrary number created in order to save your position. You could say that when half the planks have been replaced, the ship is no longer Theseus's ship. But what makes that number more significant in determining identity than one or two planks? Identity must be simple, not composite. So if matter is what constitutes your identity, then any loss of matter is a loss of identity. But you have already said that losing a limb does not destroy the identity of a person, and losing a few planks does not destroy the identity of a ship. So therefore identity cannot reside in sameness of body.

H: Well . . . I suppose you're right. But this is stupid; I'm not a ship! I'm a person, and people have souls and—

P3: Ah, the soul. I see you have drastically changed your position, Miss Sherman, from identity relying on the physical to identity relying on the strictly non-physical. Your soul,

you say, is the immaterial, enduring, simple essence of you. This would be a quick solution, if it were true. But there is absolutely no reason to believe in souls. I suppose, when we needed to explain where thoughts and feelings took place, there was once a reason to believe. But now that modern science tells us that mentality resides in the brain, we can throw away the outdated theory of souls. You have no evidence; there is no way to observe a soul.

H: So what! We humans can't know everything; it is narcissistic to assume that we can. There are just some things in the world we can't understand completely. And I may not be able to prove the existence of souls, but you can never prove their non-existence.

P3: That is exactly what troubles me about souls. But setting aside the issue of existence, let us assume that people do have souls. Let us also set aside the definition of a person—if humans have souls, then why not animals. Well then, souls still cannot constitute identity, for who is to say that we are inhabited by the same soul.

H: I can assure you that I have the same soul. I think I would know.

P3: How could you possibly know? In a straight line, an elastic ball that intersects another similar ball, transfers to it all of its motion. In other words, the whole state of the substance is transferred from one object to another. If this situation is possible in material matter, why wouldn't it be possible in immaterial matter? For all we know, thousands of souls have passed through your body during this conversation—

H: This isn't a conversation; this is supposed to be my presentation!

P3: —showing that we can never know if the soul is permanent and, therefore, cannot base sameness of identity on the soul.

H: Fine, I'm not my body and I don't have a soul. I am my consciousness, then. I am Hannah Sherman, a flow of consciousness connected by my memories, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

P4: Hmm, my first question to you is, what makes the memories yours.

H: What?

P4: Well, how do you know that your memories are your own? Allow me to illustrate. You go to the theater with your friends. You go home and have memories of the night. These would obviously seem to be your memories, right? However, as you went to the theater, a hypnotist kidnapped a stranger and perfectly synched their brain to yours so that everything you did, they thought they were doing and every memory you had, they thought was theirs. Both "you" and the stranger have the same memories and thoughts about that night, but which one is the real you?

H: Obviously, I am! The one who actually went to the theater with my friends.

P4: But now you are using memories to define personal identity and personal identity to define memory. This is clearly circular reasoning. In addition, memories can be falsified, repressed, and forgotten. How can something so dynamic constitute a permanent identity? For example, let us say that you murdered someone, but in the rush of adrenaline you have no memory of committing the act. By your standards, you would not be the same person who committed the crime because you do not remember it. But this conclusion seems strange.

In addition, let us say that you graduated high school at age 18, finished graduate school at age 35, and began your career as a farmer at age 60. At 35 you remember graduating high school, and at 60 you remember finishing graduate school. But at 60, you do not remember graduating high school. According to your criteria, you would be the same person at 35 as you were at 18 and the same person at 60 as you were at 35, but not the same person at 60 as you were at 18. This seems to contradict the Transitive Property of logic, which states that if A is B, and B is C, then A is C.

H: Okay, I'll admit that memory is not a good criteria for who I am. My memories may come and go but I am still the same person. Well how about thoughts, beliefs, and feelings?

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Those surely are more reliable than memories as a criteria for personal identity. . . . But no, I change my mind because I know exactly what you are going to say. Just like memories, we can trick ourselves about our thoughts, beliefs, and feelings too. And these things change almost every day. If I were to say that, then I would need to agree I'm a new person every time my thoughts, feeling, or beliefs change. But I do not agree with that.

P5: Well, neither would I. People cannot remain static while the world around them is dynamic. New experiences prompt us to think new thoughts and force us to change our beliefs and feelings, but we can still remain the same person. Yet, even though these things do not remain constant, they are all connected in a series. One can track a ball's physical movement through space as it is thrown from one spot to another. He/she can know by the series of successive positions it occupies that it is the same ball. A similar strategy can be used to determine sameness of person by showing that their present mental states are connecting in a successive series to their past mental states. This is called psychological continuity and is the only thing that matters in identity.

P6: That seems plausible. Let me ask you this, though. Hannah Sherman here has cancer—

H: You're really a cheerful bunch, aren't you?

P6: —and the only way she will survive is if her brain, housing her mentality, is transferred into a new body. Now, if this is done, then you would agree that the Hannah-brain/new body combination is now Hannah Sherman.

P5: Yes, because identity depends on psychological continuity and that would clearly reside with the Hannah-brain/new-body combination.

P6: Now, let us say that it is now scientifically possibly to separate the two hemispheres of the brain into two identical and fully functioning parts. Each hemisphere houses Hannah's full mentality and is put into two different healthy bodies. Now your theory would have us conclude that both Hannah-hemisphere/new-body combinations is Hannah, seeing as they are both psychologically continuous with her. But two cannot equal one. And if they were both identical to Hannah, then by the transitive property, the two Hannah-

hemisphere/new-body combinations would have to be identical to each other. But they would go their separate ways and live separate lives; it would be incoherent to say that they are identical to each other. And you cannot choose one to be identical to Hannah, seeing as they both have the exact same relationship with her and any choice would be arbitrary.

H: So what? Then I'm not both of them and I'm not one of them. So I cease to exist in that situation? That makes no sense to me because splitting my mentality into two new bodies seems better than dying.

P5: That is because you do survive the operation.

P6: How could you say that, after the issues I have just raised?

P5: Because Hannah has, in this situation, survival without identity. You see, what I was going to say before you interrupted me is that psychological continuity accounts for identity only in a one-to-one relationship. In the operation without brain fission, Hannah survives and retains her identity because there is one life to one mentality. But in the second operation with brain fission, there is a two-to-one relationship and identity is lost. But do not despair, Hannah, because identity is not really what matters most, survival is. You have the same relationship with each of the new bodies containing one of your hemispheres as you did with yourself before the operation.

P6: What an ingenious save, my dear colleague. But I still do not agree. According to your revised theory, neither of the Hannah-hemisphere/new-body combinations retains Hannah's identity. But if one is killed, the other suddenly acquires it. This seems odd. The absence of presence of competition is a strange criteria for identity to depend on.

P5: The only reason this seems strange to you is because you value identity more than you should. This whole time we have been under the false impression that identity is important, but it doesn't matter to survival if we cease to have identity. The only thing that is important is that we have psychological continuity.

P7: I disagree! For, I observe that if given the choice between psychological continuity and becoming the person we most want to be, we would choose the latter. This shows that psy-

chological continuity is not what is most important in survival. Let me ask you this, Hannah; do you wish to be more intelligent.

H: I would have to say yes, if only to be able to wrap my head around what you people are talking about!

P7: And if you were hooked up to a machine that could replace any trait you wanted it to with whatever you wanted it to, would you choose for it to make you more intelligent?

H: Yes, I think I would. I would also choose for it to make me more patient, kinder, less selfish, more creative, more compassionate—

P7: And so on. You see, we would all like to improve ourselves, and we each hold onto an image of our perfect self that we aspire to. We would sacrifice psychological continuity in order to attain this perfect self, proving that these aspirations are really what matters most to survival.

P5: That proves nothing! You have only succeeded in showing that everyone has desires. You have not proved that Hannah would survive the machine and her loss of psychological continuity. You have only proved that the fulfillment of desires is more important to some than survival and psychological continuity.

H: You know what, you guys drive me crazy! I don't even know why I came here, but it wasn't for this! Maybe I don't have an identity! Let's leave it at that!

P8: She's right! The reason she has not been able to answer the question about her identity is because there is no underlying "self." If we cannot encounter something, then we cannot know that it exists, as someone explained earlier in relation to souls. There is no reason to believe in something that you can't observe, and have you ever observed yourself? The answer is no. You have observed perceptions and sensations that go on, but never yourself. "Content" exists, but not a "container." We are all merely masses of perceptions and sensations.

P9: Nonsense! There is no such thing as perception and sensation without the self. Let me ask you, Hannah, where is that chair positioned?

H: It's in front of the stage.

P9: According to your orientation it is, but according to another orientation it is behind the stage. You cannot place an object in space without relating it to yourself. Similarly, you cannot feel pain without knowing that it is happening to yourself. The statement, "That hurts" implies "That hurts me." Perception is necessarily egocentric therefore a minimal self must exist.

H: Okay, so a self must exist in order to perceive. But does that mean that we cease to exist when we cease to perceive. That when I sleep I no longer exist, but return to existence when I awake? That seems strange, given our definition of identity.

P10: Well maybe our definition of identity is false. Perhaps we struggle to define it because it is not real. We say we are looking for numerical sameness to define identity, but throughout this whole discussion we have secretly been looking for qualitative sameness. That is what is important to us in our conception of the self. We are being sent on a wild goose chase! But just like if we accept determinism, how could we function if we truly accepted that personal identity does not exist. What would it be like to believe that our bodies house countless, flighty persons that form no coherent "self."

H: I don't think that I could really train myself to accept that, the illusion of self is too strong. Even as I respond, I answer under the assumption that "I" have an enduring identity and am connected to my future self. I think I will forever search for endurance in this ephemeral world because it is in my nature. So with that, I, Hannah Sherman, am going to be talking to you tonight about . . .

