

PRÉCIS OF THE HUMAN ANIMAL
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

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The book starts by arguing that the problem of personal identity over time is often wrongly put. The problem is usually stated like this: if you've got a person existing at one time and a person existing at another time, what has to be the case – what is necessary and sufficient – for them to be the same person? It asks what it takes for a person to persist *as a person*.

I objected that this assumes, without any argument at all, that a person has to persist as a person. It assumes that if I exist at all at some time in the past or the future, I am a person then. It rules out the possibility that I might start out as a merely potential or future person, and that I might end up as a former person. This assumption is especially pernicious if being a person implies having certain mental properties. In that case, the assumption that I can only persist as a person amounts to the claim that I cannot exist in the past or future without having any mental properties. It follows I cannot have been an embryo, and that I could never end up in a persistent vegetative state. The principle that I can only persist as a being with certain mental properties may or may not be true. But it is not an assumption that we ought to build into the way we enquire about personal identity. It is something that needs to be argued for.

(For that matter, the usual question assumes that necessarily all people persist under the same conditions: if there could be gods, or angels, or intelligent computers, they would all have to have the same persistence conditions as we human people. That may also be true; but again, it's not something we're entitled to assume before we start inquiring about personal identity.)

I proposed that we ask not what it takes for you and me to persist as a person, but what it takes for us to persist *simpliciter*. In other words, if you've got a person – a human person – existing at one time, and you've got something existing at another time – whether or not it's a person then – the question is what is necessary and sufficient for them to be one thing,

rather than two.

I tried to answer the question of our identity over time by arguing that you and I are biological organisms: human animals. That is what we *seem* to be. And there appears to be a serious problem facing anyone who claims that we are *not* animals. There is a human animal for each one of us. My animal – the one standing here – has my brain, my sense organs, my surroundings, my education, and so on. That seems to suffice for it to have the same mental properties as I have. If this animal didn't think, or wasn't conscious, or differed from me in any psychological respect, it would be a mystery why there was this difference. Now suppose I believe I am not an animal. It follows from my belief that there are *two* thinking beings here, me and the animal. If that's not bad enough, it is hard to see how I could ever know which thinker *I* was: the animal or the nonanimal. Each would have the same grounds, it seems, for supposing that it is not the animal; yet only one of them can be right. For all I could ever know, it seems, *I* could be making this mistake. So even if I'm not an animal, it's hard to see how I could ever know it. The obvious solution to the problem, I argued, is to say that I am an animal. And if I am an animal, then what it takes for me to persist is what it takes for an animal to persist.

Most of the rest of the book is an attempt to work out the consequences of the claim that we are animals ('animalism') for our identity over time.

One consequence is that *our* identity over time does not consist in any sort of psychological continuity. Personal identity – or at least our identity – has nothing to do with psychology at all, despite what the vast majority of those writing on personal identity have said.

Why say that our identity has nothing to do with psychology? Because we are human animals, and no sort of psychological continuity is either necessary or sufficient for a human animal to persist. Not necessary, because each human animal starts out as an embryo, and could end up as a human vegetable. Human embryos and human vegetables have no psychological properties at all, and you can't be psychologically continuous with a being that has no psychology. If you are an animal, you can survive without any sort of psychological continuity.

The brain-transplant story, if it is possible, shows that no sort of psychological

continuity is sufficient for a human animal to persist. If your cerebrum gets put into another head, the one who gets that organ, and no one else, will be psychologically continuous, at that time, with you as you were before the operation. But the surgeons don't thereby move a human animal from one head to another. They simply move an organ from one animal to another, just as they might do with a kidney or a liver. We can have full psychological continuity between one human animal and another.

Thus, if we are animals, psychology is entirely irrelevant to our identity over time.

It also seems to follow from our being animals that we are only temporarily and contingently people. Or at least that is so if you have to have certain mental properties at a given time to count as a person at that time. If that's what it is to be a person, each human animal starts out as a nonperson and may end up as a nonperson.

Finally, I tried to give a positive account of what it takes for a human animal to persist. It seems to be the same as what it takes for animals of other sorts to persist. More specifically, I proposed, in the tradition of Aristotle and Locke, that an organism persists just as long as its biological life continues, where your biological life is the event or process that assimilates new matter, expels waste, fights infection, and generally keeps that complex organic structure humming along.

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