

## *The complex and simple views of personal identity*

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What is the difference between the complex view of personal identity over time and the simple view? Traditionally the defenders of the complex view are said to include Locke and Hume, defenders of the simple view to include Butler and Reid. In our own time it is standard to think of Chisholm and Swinburne as defenders of the simple view and Shoemaker, Parfit, Williams and Lewis as defenders of the complex view. But how exactly is the distinction to be characterised?

One difference between the two camps is that defenders of the simple view emphasize the difference between diachronic personal identity and the identity of other objects; they insist that in the case of the other familiar types that figure in philosophical puzzle cases about identity – ships, statues, plants and so on – the correct view is the complex one. On the other hand defenders of the complex view do not hold a simple view of other things; rather they think that the complex view is correct across the board. We therefore need an account of the distinction which allows us to speak generally of ‘the complex/simple view of the diachronic identity of things of sort S’ where ‘S’ is a sortal term.

A respectable view about problems of identity in general is that there aren’t any: any genuine philosophical puzzles can be rephrased so that the language of identity drops out (Lewis 1986). In what follows I offer an account of the simple/complex contrast which conforms to this Lewisian view.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The stimulus for this paper was my attendance at a workshop on Identity at the University of Nantes. There Eric Olson, in a talk entitled ‘The Myth of the Simple View’ argued, entirely convincingly I believe, against various proposed accounts of the distinction formulated using the language of identity. His commentator argued that Parfit’s proposal that the simple view be understood as the view that personal identity does not consist in any ‘further fact’ trivialises it: for any  $x$ , the fact that  $x = x$  does not consist in any further fact, so since for any  $x$

We can begin by distinguishing two types of constraint on personhood.

Type (1), or synchronic constraints, are capturable in the form:

(1) If  $x$  is a person, then if  $x$  exists at  $t$ ,  $Fxt$

where ' $F$ ' represents a term for a non-historical property, a property rooted only in the time at which it is had, to use Chisholm's language, which requires nothing of the world at any other time, so that there are no possible pasts or futures inconsistent with its possession at that time.

Type (2), or diachronic, constraints on personhood are capturable in the form:

(2) If  $x$  is a person, then if  $x$  exists at  $t$  and  $t^*$ ,  $Rxtt^*$ .

At first pass, the complex view is the view that there are diachronic constraints on personhood not logically equivalent to or logically implied by the constraint ' $x$  exists at  $t$  and  $t^*$ ' or ' $x$  is a person and  $x$  exists at  $t$  and  $t^*$ ' and not entailed by the totality of synchronic constraints. If we call a diachronic constraint on personhood which is logically equivalent to or logically implied by one of the two forms just mentioned 'trivial', and call a diachronic constraint entailed by the totality of synchronic constraints 'redundant', we can put this by saying that the complex view is the view that *there are non-trivial, non-redundant diachronic constraints on personhood*. The simple view is that there are none.

This fits well with the classification of the complex theorists listed above.

According to Locke, for example, personal identity consists in the relation of co-consciousness. So if a person  $x$  exists at times  $t$  and  $t^*$ ,  $x$  will be co-conscious at  $t$  with  $x$  at  $t^*$ , a constraint which is non-trivial and non-redundant in the sense explained.

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and  $y$ , if  $x = y$  the fact that  $x = y$  is the fact that  $x = x$ , for any  $x$  and  $y$ , if  $x = y$  the fact that  $x = y$  consists in no further fact. The take-home lesson, I think, is that the characterisation of the simple/complex distinction should be made without using the language of identity.

Again, the familiar modern-day psychological continuity accounts, whether formulated in a four-dimensional or three-dimensional framework, satisfy this definition of a complex view, as do the competing non-psychological, or bodily, accounts.

But this characterisation of the complex view is nonetheless inadequate. One version (Swinburne's) of the simple view is that, although persons are not souls (because persons have material parts as well), the identity of a person is constituted by the identity of his soul – you go where your soul goes (Swinburne and Shoemaker 1984). According to this proposal there is a non-trivial, non-redundant diachronic constraint on personhood: if  $x$  is a person who exists at  $t$  and  $t^*$  then  $x$  has at  $t$  the same soul that  $x$  has at  $t^*$ . This is non-trivial, since it is not *logically* equivalent to or logically implied by ' $x$  (is a person and) exists at  $t$  and  $t^*$ ' (even if it is metaphysically equivalent in some sense). It is non-redundant since even if a person needs a soul whenever he exists it is consistent with this that he has different souls at different times (just as, even if a person needs a body whenever he exists, he may have different bodies at different times). Nevertheless, the view that personal identity is constituted by soul identity (about which nothing more can be said) should surely be thought as a version of the simple view of diachronic personal identity.

The characterisations of the simple and complex views given so far can be rectified as follows to accommodate this point. Call a diachronic constraint on personhood,  $Rxtt^*$ , an 'identity-involving' constraint if its satisfaction requires that something *other than* a person exists at times  $t$  and  $t^*$ . That  $x$  has at  $t$  and  $t^*$  the same soul, according to the soul theory just described, is an identity-involving diachronic constraint. We may now say that the complex view is the view that *there are non-trivial, non-redundant, non-identity-involving diachronic*

*constraints on personhood*. The simple view is that there are not, that the only non-trivial, non-redundant diachronic constraints on personhood are identity-involving.<sup>2</sup>

This is the characterisation of the distinction I recommend. It fits well with the widespread idea that the simple view is that the cross-temporal identity of persons cannot consist in the holding of any relations other than the relation of identity itself.

But I have to consider an objection. Swinburne puts forward an account of diachronic personal identity according to which persons are not souls, but personal identity is constituted by soul identity and the criterion of identity of souls, as (Aristotelian) substances, is identity of form and continuity of immaterial stuff (1984: 27). On this proposal there is a non-trivial, non-redundant, non-identity-involving diachronic constraint on personhood: if person  $x$  exists at  $t$  and  $t^*$  the soul which constitutes  $x$  at  $t$  must have continuity of immaterial stuff with the soul which constitutes  $x$  at  $t^*$ . This is not an identity-involving constraint since continuity of stuff does not require identity of stuff, and by itself, without identity of form, does not entail identity of substance, i.e., soul.

I think the thing to say is that the soul theory, elaborated in this Aristotelian way, is, indeed, contrary to Swinburne's intention, a version of the complex view. Why not? It is a dualist view, of course. But that a view is dualist does not entail that it is simple. Locke's account of personal identity is dualist, it involves a tripartite ontology of persons, immaterial thinking things, and men (though Locke hedges his bets and says only that it is 'probable' that that which thinks in us is immaterial), and explains that personal identity consists in co-

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<sup>2</sup> More precisely, the simple view is that the concept of a person is the concept of a *sort* of persisting object which is not governed by non-trivial, non-redundant, non-identity-involving diachronic constraints. So it is the contrary, not contradictory, of the complex view, i.e., that the concept of a person is the concept of a sort of persisting object which is governed by such constraints. A third view is that the concept of a person, like the concepts of *a thing originating in Alaska*, *a thing which has a permanent mass of 1kg*, and *a temporarily blue thing*, is not a sortal concept at all. The proponent of the simple view needs to explain what distinguishes the concept of a person from such non-sortal concepts (so does the proponent of the complex view, but for him is easy).

consciousness of the immaterial thinking things that ‘think in’ persons: the person in which thinking substance  $S$  is thinking at  $t$  is the person in which thinking substance  $S^*$  is thinking at  $t^*$  just in case  $S$  at  $t$  is co-conscious with  $S^*$  at  $t^*$ . But Locke’s account is paradigmatically complex. A feature of the soul view, even as elaborated by Swinburne, not possessed by the Lockean account, is that it requires that the existence of a person at two times requires the existence at those two times of some *other* entity – his soul – which determines his identity. But this is also a feature of the brain account of personal identity according to which, although persons are not brains (they are generally larger), a person persists just in case his brain persists (whether or not it carries psychological continuity with it). The brain account seems unmotivated. It implies that if Brown’s brain is put into Robinson’s body, first being wiped of the information contained in it and via Williams’s fabulous brain-state transfer device put into a state information-theoretically identical with that of Robinson’s brain, the resultant person, Brownson, who looks *and* thinks exactly like Robinson, is Brown. But motivated or not, it is paradigmatically a version of the complex view (since brains are paradigmatically material objects whose persistence does not require persistence of matter but requires, but is not entailed by, material continuity). Swinburne’s version of the soul theory, according to which souls can undergo a complete replacement in their psychologies, but are nonetheless what determine personal identity, though they are only parts of persons, is a sort of dualist version of the brain account, and no more simple than it is.

I conclude that it is defensible to define the complex view of personal identity as the view that there are non-trivial, non-redundant, non-identity-involving diachronic constraints on personhood.

Two points should be noted.

First, it should be noted that so defined the complex view comes in two varieties.

According to the first variety, if a person exists at times  $t$  and  $t^*$  there exist at these times some entities (possibly existing at other times and possibly, but not necessarily, identical) *distinct from* the person. Locke's view is of this variety. If a person exists at  $t$  and  $t^*$  then there are thinking substances existing at  $t$  and  $t^*$ , which may or may not exist at other times and may or may not be identical, but are co-conscious at  $t$  and  $t^*$ . The Lewisian psychological continuity has the same structure. According to this account if a person exists at  $t$  and  $t^*$  there must be person-stages existing at  $t$  and  $t^*$  (which will not exist at other times and will be distinct) which are psychologically continuous (R-related). Complex accounts of diachronic personal identity of this type may be called 'two-level'; in a sense they ground the identity of persons in a relation (other than identity) between non-persons.

According to the second variety of the complex view, the existence of a person at two times does *not* require the existence at those two times of any entities distinct from the person. Since complex accounts of this second type are perfectly possible, a desire to deny that personal identity is grounded in a relation between other things is not sufficient to motivate acceptance of the simple view.

The second point I wish to note concerns the link often asserted between the simple view and the denial of the possibility of indeterminacy in diachronic personal identity.

Standard puzzle cases of diachronic personal identity are often described as cases where, though everything else is clear, the fact of diachronic personal identity is unclear. If the standard Brown/Brownson case is thought of as such, for example, then the situation has to be thought of as one in which it is perfectly determinate that there is exactly one person in room 100 (where Brown is) before the transplant, perfectly determinate that there is exactly one person in room 101 (where Brownson is) after the transplant, but indeterminate whether

Brownson is Brown, hence indeterminate whether there is someone, exactly one person, both in room 100 before the transplant and in room 101 afterwards.

According to the complex theorist, as I have explained this view, this indeterminacy can be due to indeterminacy whether a non-trivial, non-redundant, non-identity-involving diachronic constraint on personhood,  $Rxtt^*$ , is satisfied where  $t$  and  $t^*$  are the two times in question, pre- and post-transplant: for example, indeterminacy whether the thinking substance thinking in  $x$  at  $t$  is co-conscious with the thinking substance thinking in  $x$  at  $t^*$ , or indeterminacy whether the person-stage of  $x$  at  $t$  is psychologically continuous with the person stage of  $x$  at  $t^*$ , or indeterminacy whether the soul constituting  $x$  at  $t$  is linked by continuity of immaterial stuff to the soul constituting  $x$  at  $t^*$ . But according to the simple view there are no non-trivial, non-redundant, non-identity-involving diachronic constraints on personhood. So given that everything but the fact of diachronic identity is clear, i.e., that it is clear that a person exists earlier and a person exists later, but is unclear only whether some person exists both earlier and later, the simple theorist can account for the indeterminacy only by saying that it is indeterminate whether some identity-involving constraint on personal identity,  $Rxtt^*$ , is satisfied, e.g., that it is indeterminate whether the soul constituting  $x$  at  $t$  is the soul constituting  $x$  at  $t^*$ . In this case there cannot be any indeterminacy of reference in the terms ‘the soul constituting  $x$  at  $t$ ’ and ‘the soul constituting  $x$  at  $t^*$ ’, for everything is clear except the fact of diachronic personal identity. Indeterminacy in diachronic personal identity according to the simple view as I have characterised it, then, requires indeterminacy in identity *itself*, in a way that offends against Evansian (Evans 1978) sensibilities. Whether this entails that the simple view excludes the possibility of indeterminate diachronic personal identity is moot. But it points to a difference between the simple view and the complex view

which has been much emphasized in the literature. It is therefore, I submit, a point in favour of the characterisation of this distinction given above that it has this consequence.

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