

## PERSONAL IDENTITY, RESPONSIBILITY AND TIME

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Before Derek Parfit's revolutionary book, *Reasons and Persons* (1984), it was assumed that a necessary condition for moral and legal responsibility is personal identity. After all, what could be more obvious than the thesis that to hold a person culpable for misconduct he or she must *be* the person who engaged in the deed? As F. H. Bradley once expressed it:

Now the first condition of the possibility of my guiltiness, or of my becoming a subject of moral imputation, is my self-sameness; I must be throughout one identical person. ... If, when we say, "I did it," the I is not to be the one I, distinct from all other I's; or if the one I, now here, is not the same I with the I whose act the deed was, then there can be no question whatever but that the ordinary notion of responsibility disappears (Bradley (1927) p. 4).

The question thus arises: What makes, or is the ontological ground of, a person at one time and a person at another time being one and the same person? In other words, what is the basis of the *numerical identity* or self-sameness of the person charged with a crime and the person who was its perpetrator? Speaking very generally, there are two responses to this question. According to the first, the "substantialist (or endurantist) view," the numerical identity of a person is grounded in a substance that is *wholly present* at each moment of its existence. According to the second, the "relationalist (or perdurance) view," there is no single substance that is "wholly present" at each moment of a person's existence.<sup>1</sup> Rather, a person is a whole (a particular) that has spatiotemporal parts, and the numerical identity of a person is grounded in the relation (or relations) between and among the different successive and overlapping stages, phases or time slices that each constitute one stage or segment in a person's life.<sup>2</sup>

The debate between the relationalist and substantialist is connected with the topic of responsibility in the following way. Substantialists have argued that their view must be correct since only on it is the person who was the perpetrator of a deed at one time numerically identical with the person who at a later time is on trial for it. For, on the relational view, where our identity is based upon a relation between *different* stages, it is alleged that we do not have *one* person who performed the crime and later is on trial for it. Rather, there is one stage where an evil deed is done and another stage where a trial is taking place, but there is no self-same substance that exists at both times. It is affirmed, therefore, that on the relational view no person can be held responsible for any past action.<sup>3</sup>

This argument was, to my knowledge, first propounded in Thomas Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (in "Of Mr. Locke's Account of Our Personal Identity," Essay III, Chapter 6, first published in 1785). He there says,

Our consciousness, our memory, and every operation of the mind, are still flowing like the water of a river, or like time itself. The consciousness I have this moment can no more be the same consciousness I had last moment, than this moment can be the last moment. Identity can only be affirmed of things which have a continued existence. Consciousness, and every kind of thought, are transient and momentary, and have no continued existence; and, therefore, if personal identity consisted in consciousness, it would certainly follow, that no man is the same person any two moments of his life; and as the right and justice of reward and punishment are founded on personal identity, no man could be responsible for his actions (Reid (1969) p. 360).

In the last section of this paper I shall explore the "argument from responsibility," as I shall call it, against the relational view of identity.

There is, however, another question I want to attend to first, namely, What connection, if any, is there between the substantialist/relationalist debate (commonly called "the endurance/perdurance" debate) on the one hand, and the debate between the A- and B-theories of time on the other? If, as some have recently argued,<sup>4</sup> the substantialist view of identity entails (some version of) the A-theory then, since the B-theory is the denial of the A-theory, it follows that B-theorists must reject the substantialist view and adopt the relational view of personal identity. In that case, however, the B-theorist will have to deal with the argument from responsibility. Thus, the question whether endurance entails the A-theory is an important one indeed. To clarify the issues involved I shall begin by turning to the A/B theory debate.

## 2. THE A- AND B-THEORY OF TIME

The debate between the A- and B-theory of time is an ontological dispute: it concerns what kinds of intrinsically temporal entities there are. For the B-theorist, the only intrinsically temporal entities are the *relations* of *simultaneous with*, *earlier than* and *later than*. Because these relations hold between terms whether those terms are, as we ordinarily say, past, present or future, it follows that all of the terms in a B-series are located at the time they are regardless of what time it is. A corollary of this view, on my interpretation of the B-theory, is that the B-facts that are the truth makers for temporal relational statements (such as, *A is earlier than B*) are "eternal."<sup>5</sup> That is, temporal relational B-facts do not exist in time (although time exists in them<sup>6</sup>), since they do not come into existence; they do not stand in temporal relations to each other (or anything else); they do not occupy moments of absolute time, and they do not exemplify the non-relational temporal properties of *pastness*, *presentness* and *futurity*. This aspect of the B-theory can be summarised by the aphorism: Time is timeless.

For the A-theorist the situation is different. There is, however, no single way to state how the A-theory differs from the B-theory, since there are many different versions of the A-theory of which I shall distinguish three. First, there is the *traditional* view according to which there are (or rather there are alleged to be) *both*

the familiar B-relations as well as A-determinations that the terms of B-relations have and then lose with the passage of time.<sup>7</sup> Second, there is the *open future* view, according to which events are non-relationally *past* and *present*, but not future since the future does not exist, it is a non-entity. On this view, neither temporal relations nor the facts they enter into are eternal, since both kinds of temporal items *come into existence* as new events are added to the sum total of existence.<sup>8</sup> Finally there is *presentism*, according to which only the present exists; the past and the future are species of unreality.<sup>9</sup> For the presentist temporal entities are “in time” in virtue of *being present*, which means to just plain exist or to exist *simpliciter*, without regard to time. On this view there are, ontologically speaking, no temporal relations, and on all (consistent) versions of presentism there are no non-relational temporal properties either (except perhaps the property of *presentness*). Indeed, insofar as I can tell, for the presentist, time has no ontological status whatsoever, or if it does, then time is grounded (inconsistently) in the (tensed) exemplification relation.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. THE ENTAILMENT THESIS

Given the variety of A-theories, it is not always clear what is meant by the claim that endurance entails the A-theory of time.<sup>11</sup> We shall have to look at the arguments to determine whether, in fact, substance ontologists must be A-theorists and if so, of what variety. Let us begin then with Robin Le Poidevin’s argument for the entailment thesis. Philosophical problems often arise through a conflict of intuitions. Le Poidevin juxtaposes three intuitions that he claims cannot be accounted for if we combine a substance ontology with the B-theory of time. We intuitively believe (a) that things, including people, change by having different properties at different times. From that it follows that (b) *I persist* and so am extended in time from say, 1945-2045, if I’m lucky. (c) We also believe that the “entire” person exists at any one moment in its life history; and that a person is “wholly present” at each moment of his or her existence. The conflict is between (b) and (c). If an individual is spread out or extended in time, then how can it have its *entire being wholly located* at a given moment? According to Le Poidevin, only on the [traditional?] A-theory can one say that whole objects have a temporal extension by “moving through time” from one moment to the next. As Le Poidevin puts it:

Now [the] tensed theory can resolve this tension between (b) and (c) by insisting that objects *change* their temporal locations, and so have temporal extension in the sense of having occupied different times in the past from those they occupy now, and from those they will occupy in the future (Le Poidevin (1991) p. 18).

It is not clear to me, however, why the “whole” temporally extended object cannot exist at each moment even if we adopt a B-theoretic ontology. Admittedly, if objects are extended in time in the way in which they are extended in space, by having different temporal parts at different times, then the entire temporally extended object cannot be present at any one time any more than the entire spatially extended object can be present at any one place.<sup>12</sup> But to assume that on the B-theory objects are extended in time as they are extended in space is to beg the question against a B-theorist, such as D. H. Mellor, who thinks that things, including persons, are objects



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