

Perry's dialogue

Sociology, Communication



In Perry's Dialogue, he introduces three fictional characters to explore the concept of personal identity. This topic arises as the character, Gretchen Weirob, lays on her deathbed seeking consolation from her friend, Sam Miller, and former student, Dave Cohen, to discuss the possibility of her survival after death. Weirob's view is that people are identified by their bodies and that their continued existence relies on the existence of their living bodies (Perry, 319).

In this paper, I will argue on behalf of her viewpoint approaching personal identity through Locke's memory theory using the distinction that real memory can only be associated with the body experiencing it. Personal identity has proven to be a very controversial topic in this dialogue. By the second night, it was argued to be defined neither by the bodily existence nor the existence of an immaterial soul (320). Instead, identity is approached by the concept of person-stages (322).

This idea implies that a person lives in consecutive stretches of consciousness connected in a logical manner. In this case, each stretch of consciousness indicates the all thoughts and emotions experienced by a person at a given moment in time (322). This leads to the Memory Theory of personal identity, which Miller suggested according to his readings on Locke. It basically states that all the past events occurring within this stream of consciousness forms memory and our personal identity consists of the accumulation of memory that can be traced linearly through it (322).

Weirob was not able to find any flaws in this theory. However, many flaws would surface without the examination of what constitutes as memory? Weirob brings up the comparison of real and apparent memory due to the <https://assignbuster.com/perrys-dialogue/>

possibility of deception where a person may "seems to remember" (323) something entirely inaccurate. Real memory is then defined as an experience remembered by the person who was present at the time of that experience(324).

Apparent memory is when someone "seems to remember" but was not actually present at the experience in question (324). In the end, the real remember is the one whose memories were caused "in the right kind of way" (324) which led Weirob to conclude that "a person is certain sort of causal process." (324) This continued to support her belief that personal identity is coexistent with bodily continuity as all her memories were formed by the actions and brain activity of her body. With a stroke of ingenuity, Miller was able to dispute her belief that personal identity lies solely within the confines of bodily identity by stating that one can identify his/herself without examination of his or her physical body (320). He says that a person is able to wake up and realize that they are the person they were the day before, prior to opening his/her eyes. He further proves this using Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, which involves the instance of someone waking up in the body of a cockroach (320). This person still maintains the sameness of person despite the difference of body.

Earlier on, Weirob had brought up the case of anticipation. She had concluded that in order for her to accept the possibility of life after death, she must believe that she can exist in another form in which she would be able to anticipate the experiences of her future self and remember the experiences of her past (323). As Miller was able to dispute her belief that personal identity is only bodily identity, he then tempts her to imagine that

there will be someone in the future who will remember the conversation they are having and all her past experiences.

However, this fails to comfort Weirob as she argues that this merely suggests the possibility of a deluded imposter harboring her memories (323). Once again the issue of real versus apparent memory detains Miller in his efforts. This led to the introduction of an additional restriction to Miller's suggestion. To provide the distinction between real and apparent memory, the heavenly person must now be the person who actually performed the actions that he/she remembers (323). So if Weirob can imagine such a person being she, then the possibility of her survival is ensured.

Nevertheless, this proves to be too ambiguous for Weirob to accept. She argues that There is no assurance that the heavenly being will be identical to her as opposed to exactly similar(325). She says that if God were able to create one such being on heaven, what is to prevent him from creating two or even three? Since God is all-powerful and not limited in his abilities, he should be able to create an infinite number of Gretchen Weirobs, all of whom would hold her memories (325). These Gretchen Weirobs cannot all be her, so the possibility of her survival is once again irrational.

Cohen then points out that Miller was asked only to provide the possibility of survival, so if Weirob were to imagine that God, being benevolent, choose to create only one heavenly Gretchen Weirob, then she cannot deny the possibility of her survival (325). To this Weirob replies that she cannot base her survival on such insubstantial conditions; she cannot tolerate that her survival depends on the right relationship between her memory to the

memory of the heavenly being as well as the lack of competition of other heavenly beings(325).

She says that if there is a possibility if two heavenly Gretchen Weirobs, she would be neither of them as one cannot be identical to two; then memory alone cannot provide the basis for identity. Therefore, even if there were to be only one heavenly being containing her memory, she cannot confirm that it will be identical to her (326). I agree with Weirob's belief that she will cease to exist upon the expiration of her body. From a biological point of view, there is no earthly evidence that suggest the continuation of a person after the end of his/her brain function.

Like Weirob suggested, it is her brain that involves the storage of information including the accumulation of her memories(321). If her brain were to stop functioning, all her memories would logically be lost. Meanwhile, there is the case where the body can continue to function without support from the brain. This is commonly known as a coma, a state in which a person is without brain activity and within this state of mind that person can be pronounced legally dead by a qualified physician. Now on the topic of survival after death, the existence of a God must be involved.

In this instance, the identity of a person can be suggested to continue if God were to create a heavenly being containing all of the deceased past memories. The possibility of survival through this case is disrupted as Weirob proved that these beings would be nothing more than exactly similar to her(323). She maintains that memory alone cannot ensure the essence of her personal identity, as God can create many heavenly beings containing her memories out of which one of them would be her (323).

Her idea of bodily continuity is proven to be the only rational method to interpret her existence as her stream of consciousness containing all the memories that comprises her personal identity ends with her death. However, Weirob's belief seems to exclude those who are distorted or incapable in their ability to store memory. For example, in the case of the hypnosis mentioned in the second night, the rememberer induced to remember Weirob's memories is disrupted in his/her stream of consciousness. 323) Yet, after the removal of the trance, he/she will continue to exist as him/herself. Weirob also mentioned people who "seem to remember" being Napoleon losing the battle of Waterloo 323). Although these people are visibly not Napoleon, they are also not considered to be nonexistent despite lack of personal identity. Other cases include patients of Alzheimer's disease who will gradually lose all their memories or those living with mental illness who are under delusions of who they really are.

These people are obviously experiencing inaccurate representations for their personal identity. Nevertheless, this does not prevent these individuals from existing. While it is correct that these individuals exist, I can argue that there is a distinction between seeming to exist and actually existing. Individuals suffering from delusions exist within their own mind, without relation to their actual environment. They seem to exist, either as Napoleon or as Gretchen Weirob, in that stretch of consciousness.

The mind is inarguably still a part of the body so while they may be not physically experiencing these events, their body, or more specifically their brain, is still needed for the creation of these memories. Therefore, they will follow the same laws of existence as any normal person. On the other hand,

those who are suffering from Alzheimer's, or any form of head trauma that forces them to lose their memories are simultaneously losing their identity. As stretches of their streams of consciousness fade away, their personal identity diminishes until there is nothing left to distinguish them from an empty shell, which is their body.