

Exploring Personal Identity: More from Dr. Jonathan Loose

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Robert J. Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your dualist co-host, Robert J. Marks. We've been talking with Dr. Jonathan J. Loose. He's author of the chapter The Simple Theory of Personal Identity and the Life Scientific in the book Minding the Brain, and we're continuing our discussion from last time. Also with me is my co-host, Angus Menuge.

He's chair of the philosophy department at Concordia University in Wisconsin and co-author with Brian Krouse and me of the great book, MindingTheBrain.org. No, that's the website, but Minding the Brain is the book. And if you want to find out more about it, go to MindingTheBrain.org. So Angus, what do you think?

Angus Menuge:

All right, so welcome back. And on the last episode as we were exploring this topic of personal identity with Dr. Jonathan Loose, we were focusing especially on personal identity at a time. In this show, we're going to be looking instead at what it means to be a person over time. What maintains identity then? And you argued that the complex view of personal identity based on continuity faces several serious problems. And maybe we could just focus on two of those.

First of all, you point out that Richard Swinburne and others have come up with thought experiments in which there is psychological or neurological continuity or both. And yet that fails to explain our intuitions about personal identity and that suggests that the self can't be reduced to that kind of continuity. But is, as you said before, a further fact. Could you give an example of this sort of thought experiment and explain the basic problem for the complex view that's being posed here?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah, sure. So of course, most of the time when we talk about personal identity, remember there's this question of what it is that we are most fundamentally. Most of the time when we talk about personal identity, I might say, "I had a headache yesterday." And when I say that, I'm saying I am the same person as the person who had a headache yesterday.

I'm making an identity claim there. Well, when I do that, normally the claim I'm making is consistent with what we call the complex view of personal identity. Because the person who had the headache yesterday is psychologically continuous with me. I have memories of that person and so on and so forth, similar character and so on. And they're also physically continuous with me. That person, there's a chain.

I'm probably still composed of the vast majority of the same matter that that person was composed of yesterday. So normally speaking, when we talk about personal identity, the complex view is a view that works. And so therefore you might say, well, okay, so maybe that's what I am then. Maybe what I am is simply this chain of physical continuity or of psychological continuity or both or something like that. And of course, that's what the complex view is asserting.

So if we're going to challenge that, what we have to do is to find some sort of scenario in which our intuitions, as you said, Angus, about personal identity, come apart from the physical and psychological continuity. Because if that can happen, if there can be a situation in which we know all the physical and psychological facts and they point to a particular conclusion, but our intuition is that the conclusion is a different one, then we have questions about whether that view is adequate to account for personal identity.

So that's why we end up with these thought experiments. I'll give you two maybe, and that will just help to clarify this in the minds of folks for whom this is fresh. As you said, Richard Swinburne gives a particular thought example when he's discussing this. So imagine this situation. Due to a brain disease, I have my right brain hemisphere replaced with one taken from a clone of me who has slightly different memories and character traits to my own.

So I've just had half my brain removed and replaced with something that's slightly different and that it causes a slightly different character and memories and so on. So the result of the operation then is this person who's going to be psychologically and physically similar to both me as I was and to this clone. So then imagine a couple of years later, sadly the disease recurs this time to the other hemisphere, the left hemisphere of the brain, and the same procedure needs to take place except with the other hemisphere.

So both hemispheres have now been replaced. And so the resulting person is both physically and psychologically quite different from the person I was right at the start. But there is this relationship. And so the question is whether that final person who is the result of these two operations is the same person as me. So in short, have I survived these operations, or is there just somebody there who's similar to me, but it's actually a different person?

And I guess, I don't know, Angus, you might agree with me, I don't know, that it's pretty ambiguous, right, the outcome of that. And that's really the intent of the story is to make us think, yeah, we don't know the answer to that question. We don't know whether we've survived or not. And if you think obviously we have survived, then you can just adjust the story a bit to increase the amount of physical and psychological change.

Or if you think we obviously haven't survived, then you can make it a bit less. So there's this zone of uncertainty. There's a vagueness, we might say, around the answer to the question. So if that's true, if we get to that situation and there's a vagueness there, then the problem is is that we know all of the physical and psychological facts. We have all that information there, and yet the answer to the question of whether I have survived or not is still indeterminate.

And so that would then imply that those physical and psychological facts, those facts about physical and psychological continuity are not sufficient to determine whether or not I have survived. And therefore, my identity, what it is that I am, most fundamentally is not actually constituted by those facts but by something else. So that's one example of a thought experiment that Swinburne uses around this.

Maybe that's sufficient just to get the point across that we can describe a situation in which despite knowing all of the relevant physical and psychological facts, the question of personal identity remains unclear, undecided, unknown, and that therefore our identity isn't constituted by those facts.

Angus Menuge:

Yeah, that's very helpful. And there are other ones too where you seem to have equal psychological and physical continuity with two individuals.

Jonathan Loose:

So you might say one hemisphere of my brain is transplanted into a waiting brain stem and body, and another hemisphere of my brain is transplanted into a third waiting brain stem and body. And so you then have these two individuals who we might say are in terms of the way they behave and who they are and their physical continuity with me, they're both identical. And so which one is me? We have these kinds of scenarios that can be set up, which really helped to illustrate inadequacy of physical and psychological continuity to account for our identity over time.

Angus Menuge:

Right. Because I mean, we're confident that two things cannot be one thing.

Jonathan Loose:

Exactly.

Angus Menuge:

It seems as if you could make an equally good case. So yeah, those are real problems. The other one though that you mentioned that is really quite down to earth and doesn't require sophisticated thought experiments has to do with what you call the paradigm cases of person-related language, which you mentioned in the previous episode. My favorite is John is the same person who suggested the basic idea of the Blackwell Companion to substance dualism in a coffee shop in San Francisco.

Jonathan Loose:

Well, I guess I'm very committed to the thought that that book arose between us. There's been a succession of events from there that led to it having enormous strength, I think, in value. And yeah, that's been a terrific project, just as this Minding the Brain book is another terrific project to be involved with. To come to your example, I suppose, yeah, so this is another point that Swinburne talks about actually. The example I just gave you where physical and psychological continuity come apart from questions of personal identity.

As I said, it's hardly what we'd call a paradigm case of personal identity is these strange ideas, thought experiments about these operations and brain transplants and so on. The more usual cases are the kind of cases that I just gave a moment ago. I say, "I had a headache yesterday." In those cases, these things do seem to line up. So Swinburne argues that these paradigm cases are what we find in the many sentences from which we learn to talk about personal identity.

And all of these paradigm cases, the way we normally talk about personal identity are cases in which physical and psychological continuity do make sense of it. And so that means that a complex view is a possible understanding of the situations and the words from which we learn about it, but it's not really the understanding that is implicit in those examples. So what do I mean by that? Well, imagine I say that sentence, "I had a headache yesterday." I'm not trying to refer to someone with whom I'm psychologically and physically continuous, but rather I'm referring to me.

I'm referring to the self of which I'm directly aware continuing to exist over time. So when I say I had a headache yesterday, it's got nothing to do with identifying that there was somebody there yesterday who is me and that was the person that had a headache. It's got everything to do with me knowing directly and being aware of the fact that yes, there is a me who continues through time and who had a headache yesterday. There's a direct awareness.

So as I put it in the chapter, the complex theorist can offer a coherent analysis of personal identity as it's typically used, but it's not the one that's implicit in those paradigm examples through which we learn about it. That the deeper sense and what we're really talking about is the simple theorist sense about direct awareness of ourselves as enduring subjects of experience. So that I think is a really interesting account because it gives due consideration, I think, to the complex theorist and why the complex theory might be one that is turned to by a number of thinkers.

But it also then emphasizes the overarching point, which is that that's not really what we're doing when we learn about, talk about experience situations in which personal identity is relevant. What we really refer to, as you say, Angus, as you said in the last episode, those people who are uncorrupted by

philosophy, what they're referring to is that ongoing sense of being a self who is continued over time and who was, in this case, the person who had the headache. It's an interesting point, I think, and helpful in this discussion.

Angus Menuge:

And if one thinks of Thomas Reid who spoke of common sense, not meaning whole sense, but the original and natural stock of judgments that people make, one can make the case from those paradigm cases that the simple view agrees with common sense, but the complex view is really a revisionist theory. In other words, it's asking us to believe that we've discovered something new that actually falsifies the ordinary ways that we make these judgments.

Well, someone might say, "Well, then it happens, doesn't it? I mean, we come up with better theories." But you argue that in a way that gives a reason to prefer the simple view of personal identity. Can you help us understand the thinking there?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah, I think it does. I mean, it's not what I would call a knockdown argument, that one. I think that's fair to say. But certainly if the basic understanding that we have of ourselves when we come to personal identity is this simple sense of things, then you're right, we are replacing that with an alternative if we turn to a complex theory. And it isn't the sense that's implicit in the examples that we use. It's not the sense that we are referring to when we make use of personal identity language.

So I just think it's important to see that this simple view is by no means a strange alternative, but rather it's the default position. And as we've seen for the other arguments, the thought experiments and so on, this revisionist view is also unable to make sense of our intuitions in those cases. Whereas, of course, the simple view is much better at being able to do that. So why take a revisionist alternative?

Angus Menuge:

That makes a lot of sense. And then it also applies to science itself. In fact, you give a couple of arguments to show that what scientists do is best explained by the idea that the same self persists over time. One of them, going back to Edmund Husserl, concerns the idea of fulfillment structures. What exactly are they and what does that all have to do with being the same person over time?

Jonathan Loose:

So when it comes to scientific practice, I think the main point here is one that extends to the whole chapter, which is that reflection on personal identity does indicate that a simple view offers a better account of what it is that we are, and that then has implications for what it is that our lives consist, of what our observation is, of what reasoning is. And so scientific activity is a particular specialized type of human activity. And so we can see there are applications of these general points in the scientific domain.

So I think I want to say that this is a broader point about all human existence and experience, but it does have special application where we have a special concern for things like observation and reasoning and achievement and all the rest of it. So yeah, so turning to fulfillment structures is just really a term for a series of experiences that one must have in order to verify a claim or to fulfill a request.

So I could pick up on an example given by J.P. Moreland of simply verifying whether a chair on the other side of the room has a scratch on it. Seems pretty trivial, but there it is. There's a series of observations that you need to make as you move over and look at the other side of the chair if you're going to be able

to claim that you've directly verified this question of whether or not the chair has a scratch on it. And so the fulfillment structure is that set of experiences.

And of course, it's going to be very important if you're going to be able to directly verify this incredibly important question. It's going to be very important that it's the same person that has each of those experiences in order that you then are not simply effectively having one person report to another each aspect of this. So there needs to be the persistence of a single individual over time in order for there to be the verification or the answer to the request that's given.

Angus Menuge:

So if we think about scientific prediction and testing, how does this idea of a persistent self apply to that? What does that have to do with personal identity over time?

Jonathan Loose:

I think if you take any prediction, in order to test that prediction, you're going to need to take a series of steps, a series of observations, and you're going to want to be in a position of being able to say that you've verified that claim. And so if you're going to have that direct observational evidence that we talked about in the last episode as well, then it's going to need to be the direct experience of one individual rather than simply a series of experiences had by different individuals existing at different moments.

And so there has to be a persistent individual running through that whole experience. In order that you can make a prediction, go out and test it, bring back the evidence, and then say make an authoritative claim that you have actually answered the question, refuted the point or whatever it is that you've been predicting, you'll be able to do.

Angus Menuge:

Good. And of course, a lot of science involves reasoning, doesn't it? So in fact, Einstein, a lot of his discoveries involved thought experiments where he had to reason out logically, how could I show that a couple of theories that seem to contradict each other are in fact consistent?

And if you think about the process of reasoning over time, why is it that many philosophers, I think this point goes back to Kant, but certainly C. D. Broad and others, they've made the point that reasoning seems to require the persistence of the self over time. Why is that and could you give an example?

Jonathan Loose:

Well, I mean, previously we said that in order for the logic of an argument to get a direct grip on us, we've got to apprehend all of the premises simultaneously so that can effectively see the contradiction or what logically follows from that. And so here we see that comprehension can come over time as we pull together the different premises or components of something in order to understand it. So again, it must be the same person that is the subject of the argument that each moment if we're going to be able to do that.

So in the chapter I compare it, just to clarify it, to the understanding of a sentence. You might read each word, each element of the sentence one piece at a time, but you're ultimately coming to an understanding of the thought conveyed by the whole. We can only claim to have understood directly the sentence if it's the same person who has read each word, so that we're again dependent on some sort of account of persons that persist over time in order to do that.

Angus Menuge:

And when we think about the credit that scientists are given, when they're awarded Nobel Prizes or other honors, it sure seems as if suppose they make a prediction decades ago, and then finally we figure out a way of verifying the prediction, it seems as if when we give that prize, we're assuming that it was the same person who made the prediction who is now being vindicated.

Otherwise, it would seem odd as if we might be giving the prize to the wrong person. And people have this point about Richard Dawkins on his materialistic view. Why is he showing up to get accolades for his books or receiving royalty checks when according to him, he didn't actually...

Jonathan Loose:

He wasn't the person who did the work in the first place.

Angus Menuge:

So it seems that whatever people might say theoretically, a practical challenge, but it's not a logical refutation would be to say, well, hang on, if our philosophy is to be consistent with our life, we have to favor some philosophy that makes sense of those sorts of experiences?

Jonathan Loose:

Well, absolutely right. I mean, if I'm going to be a young scientist who's got great ambitions for achievements in the future, or someone, as you say, looking back at the things that have been achieved and wanting to receive the accolades and no doubt a few checks along the way and things like that for what's been written or achieved, then that only makes sense if indeed the person looking forward is the same person who will do the things or the person looking backward is the same person who has done them.

And so we need to have an understanding of ourselves that's consistent with the activity that we're involved with. Otherwise, we're taking one view in life and another view in our world view, if you like, or our perspective on how life should be understood. And these things have to line up. There can't be an inconsistency there. And I think that's why as we've been talking about this chapter as a whole, I've wanted to emphasize that these points, they certainly are relevant for the practice of science.

If we're going to make real sense of what it means to reason, if we're going to make real sense of what it means to observe, if we're going to do that, given the holistic nature, the unified nature of consciousness, then we need to think very carefully about what it is that we are. But actually that goes for all observation and it goes for all reasoning, and it goes for all aspiration and all senses of achievement. So this question of personal identity really is a very, very important one.

The question, what am I, has significant impact in every area. And so yeah, it's an important thing to wrestle with. I think bringing us back to where we started, I think we're talking about Daniel Dennett's book and his work, which is a brilliant writer and has contributed so much and been valued by so many. And yet the answer he had with regard to consciousness was essentially to say that what doesn't fit with a naturalistic materialistic approach is something that we to explain away rather than to explain.

And I think there's a different orientation that many of us would want to take respectfully to that, which is simply to say that no, we need to start with an understanding of the world that can accommodate all of the data, that can accommodate both our first-person perspectives and what it means to be conscious persons, as well as accommodate all that we learn as we look at the world of public objects and apply scientific methods in our understanding of those. So this I think is the really crucial point about this whole area of personal identity.

Angus Menuge:

It's much like the point that Thomas Nagel makes in *Mind and Cosmos*. He says that essentially in our attempt to give a comprehensive account of reality, we ultimately have to include the inquirer and not just what the inquirer is inquiring into.

Jonathan Loose:

Absolutely. And it's understandable, isn't it, Angus, that if your great concern is to be observing in the world, it's so easy, isn't it, when something is so ever present as our own selves for it to fade into the background, to be a kind of Ganzfeld that is just... We cease to be aware of.

We cease to remember that we are actually a part of the reality that we are investigating. And I think it's just the reminder that not only that we are part of that reality, but also that being part of that reality has enormous consequences for the way that we understand it.

Angus Menuge:

Well, to wrap this up, looking at your chapter as a whole, which by the way is a marvelous chapter, what do you hope that working scientists and the many others who esteem science should conclude after reading your chapter? What's the big takeaway that you hope they might draw?

Jonathan Loose:

Yeah, thanks. I think it's that love for science doesn't imply believing that all of reality must be physical reality. And in fact, love for science should imply considering all of the evidence, and it includes that messy first personal phenomenal stuff that we might rather ignore or deny, just to make things work out a bit neater, given what we already think we know.

So I think it's that sense that no, we're facing a reality that is so rich that sometimes we have to deal with some things that are a little bit more inconvenient in our worldview and in our understanding of what reality must be.

Angus Menuge:

In fact, I myself look forward to having another coffee with you in San Diego this November, which I tend to think is most naturally explained by the simple view of personal identity.

Jonathan Loose:

Well, me too, Angus, and I hope we can have that coffee. And if the Blackwell Companion, the substance dualism came out of coffee in San Francisco, I wonder what might come of coffee in San Diego this year. I trust something new and something quite special.

Angus Menuge:

I hope so too. This has been a delight, and I thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. Again, it's a marvelous chapter, which I hope gets a very wide readership.

Jonathan Loose:

Thank you, Angus. It's great to be with you. Thank you.

Robert J. Marks:

Yes. Can you hear me now?

Angus Menuge:

Yes, yes, yes.

Robert J. Marks:

That's great. Guys, okay, the world needs to know that during this podcast here in Waco, Texas, we had a tornado warning. I had to leave the podcast for a while, so that's why I've been so silent for a while. Now, guys, this is amazing. Jonathan is in Great Britain. Angus is in Wisconsin. Austin Egbert, who's coordinating this, is in Kansas, and I'm in Waco, Texas. We're all talking together like we're in the same room. It's just astonishing.

It's amazing when all of the parts work together, but I didn't anticipate a tornado warning in the middle of the podcast. Thank you, Jonathan. This was really great. I tell you, I want to summarize my takeaway from this podcast and the last podcast, and that is that scientist examining scientist is a meta phenomena. You're turning yourself back in on looking at yourself. And meta phenomena is really, really weird, and it has applications in some mind-bending places like girdle, for example.

The whole thing was self-refuting. And then taking down self refuting statements like there is no truth. Well, is that truth? And like you pointed out, that we as human beings can understand understanding. We know about knowing, and we also know about the unknowable. In computer science, we have something which is called Chaitin's number, which you can prove that exists, but you can also prove that it's unknowable. We know about the unknowable.

And in my area of artificial intelligence, this relates to the fact that artificial general intelligence will never have this meta ability. So that I think is a bump in the road for getting general artificial intelligence that's going to take over the world. Although I did, I asked ChatGPT to make a joke and I said, "I don't use ChatGPT because," and then I said, "Finish it with something funny." And then it says, "Because I'm afraid that ChatGPT would become self-aware and start to give sarcastic answers... Oh, wait a minute, too late." That was kind of a...

Jonathan Loose:

It's not bad.

Robert J. Marks:

Huh?

Jonathan Loose:

It's not bad for an AI.

Robert J. Marks:

No, it isn't bad. It isn't bad. I mean, it was frankly hilarious, and it did have this meta phenomena of examining itself. But yeah, artificial intelligence is never going to have that capability. Well, thank you, Jonathan. This was a really great time, and I enjoyed it. And please know that I was using Bluetooth earphones, so I listened to the whole thing in my tornado room. So this is great.

We've been talking to Dr. Jonathan J. Loose, who is the author of the chapter, The Simple Theory of Personal Identity and The Life Scientific in the book, Minding the Brain, and my co-host has been Angus Menuge. He's chair of the philosophy department at Concordia University at Wisconsin, and this has

been a great time together. Thank both of you, gentlemen. So until next time on Mind Matters News, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

This has been Mind Matters News with your host, Robert J. Marks. Explore more at mindmatters.ai. That's mindmatters.ai. Mind Matters News is directed and edited by Austin Egbert. The opinions expressed on this program are solely those of the speakers. Mind Matters News is produced and copyrighted by the Walter Bradley Center for Natural and Artificial Intelligence at Discovery Institute.