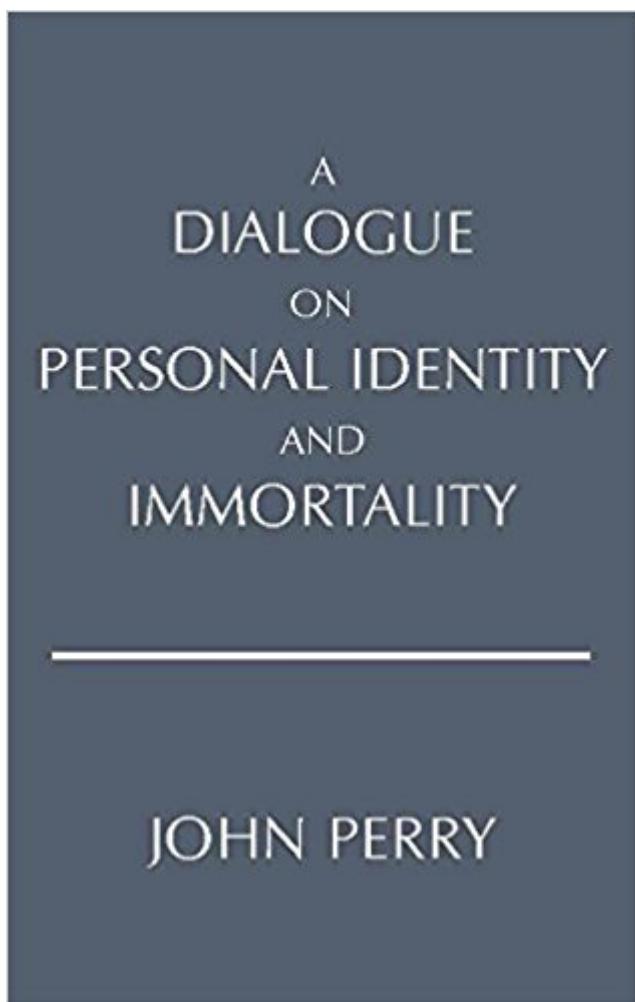


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A Dialogue On Personal Identity And Immortality (Hackett Philosophical Dialogues)



Synopsis

Perry's excellent dialogue makes a complicated topic stimulating and accessible without any sacrifice of scholarly accuracy or thoroughness. Professionals will appreciate the work's command of the issues and depth of argument, while students will find that it excites interest and imagination. --David M. Rosenthal, CUNY, Lehman College

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Customer Reviews

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--David M. Rosenthal, CUNY, Lehman College

John Perry is Professor of Philosophy, Stanford University.

I think this did a reasonable justice to the issues of personal identity, but the conversation between the characters did not add the extra flavor that I expected from a dialogue. Still would recommend, that's hardly a major criticism and it's a good overview of the problems of personal identity (and, being it involves the possibility of an afterlife, it focuses on the types of identity that would be required for those to be coherent as well).

If you are interested in a philosophical analysis of personal identity, you will not find a better introduction than this little volume. It is, however, just an introduction. It raises issues without fully developing them, which is fine, since it does not pretend to be more than an introduction. For the same reason it omits various issues. The most important omitted issue IMO is the view of the Buddha, David Hume, Derek Parfit and doubtless others that personal identity is in a sense an illusion. To get deeper into these issues, I recommend Part III of Parfit's Reasons and Persons. One quibble: notwithstanding the book's title, it does not discuss immortality. Survival after death is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for immortality.

In this delightful booklet John Perry, a philosophy professor at Stanford, discusses personal identity and immortality. It is implied that immortality is meaningless without personal identity, and therefore almost the entire argument is about personal identity really. The setting of the dialogue is dramatic: a philosophy teacher, Gretchen, lies dying in a hospital after a motorcycle accident. She is visited by two friends: Sam, a chaplain, and Dave, a former student. She asks them to comfort her and gives them an apparently easy task: to show that it is possible for personal identity to survive the death of the body. She does not ask them for good evidence or some probability estimate of this happening - but just for the logical possibility of the survival of personal identity. In other words she questions whether the idea of personal survival is even coherent, if it makes any sense at all. Of course Sam and Dave find it very difficult to convince her. I found the dialogue very readable with some flashes of humor, expressions of passion, anger, sadness - the whole lot one would expect in such a setting. And at the same time we get a good philosophical debate. Excellent. In the second night all three agree that personal identity is contingent on memory, or rather on the continuity of memory, but in a way I found very puzzling they all also immediately agree that there is an important distinction to be made between what one really remembers and what one only seems to remember. This, I think, is a big mistake. There is of course an obvious difference between an atomic explosion and the simulation of an atomic explosion, but as far as experience goes "is" and "seems" are identical. When I see a red apple it makes no sense to wonder whether I may only seem to be seeing a red apple. There is no difference playing chess and simulating the playing of chess. Still, based on the distinction between remembering and seeming to remember Gretchen shoots down all arguments Sam and Dave propose for defending the very possibility of survival of personal identity after the death of the body. But, by that standard, personal identity is not possible even before death. After all how can I be certain that I remember my past? Maybe I only seem to remember what happened

yesterday. Gretchen might have answered that the continuity of the body (and particularly of the brain) before death proves that what I remember is real - but then how do I know that yesterday I had the same body I have today? Maybe this too is a wrong memory. Another error I found in the argumentation is that the continuation of personal identity after the death of the body is imagined only through the recreation of a "heavenly person". This arbitrarily assumes that the "person" disappears at the death of the body and must therefore be recreated somehow - which shows that by "person" Perry (as all three characters in the dialogue agree on that) imagines some kind of body. To be fair in the first night Gretchen has shown that the idea of personal identity without the benefit of a body (i.e. the idea of the "soul") makes not sense because if souls existed we would know nothing about them. This argument is valid but is solipsistic in nature. After all neither can we know anything about other peoples' consciousness and still we assume that other people are conscious; in the same way we can safely assume that other people have souls. In fact I find that for all practical purposes "soul" and "consciousness" can be used interchangeably. Finally the idea of the possible recreation of a person in heaven is rendered absurd by pointing out that then it would be possible to create several identical heavenly bodies which would negate personal identity. But why is that? On what logical grounds must one assume a link between personal identity and uniqueness of body? This is what we empirically find to be the case in our condition in this life, but it is not logically necessary. I can easily imagine my personal identity experiencing through two bodies. Even worse, one can imagine a case where Gretchen's body while alive is copied atom by atom to create a second copy of her. Would this event in some way evaporate the original Gretchen's personal identity? Of course not. But if the possibility of producing several copies of the material body of Gretchen is not problematic, why should the same possibility when applied to her "heavenly body" be? In any case, this 49 page booklet was a joy to read - but also strangely upsetting: I wished I could find a way to insert myself in the book and argue against Gretchen. Which shows how taken I was by the story. Anyway I also learned something about the craft of writing a philosophical dialogue: You never have all characters agree easily on anything. At least one character must question any claim introduced (no matter how obvious it may seem to the writer of the dialogue) and have other characters defend it before continuing.

Thanks.

I purchased this book for a college course in Philosophy. I expected it to be boring, but to my surprise it was very interesting. If you want to be a lawyer or politician, you might want to consider

purchasing this book. Socrates was brilliant and questioned everything, as dictated by Plato. Also, I am a first time student of Philosophy and before taking the course thought I would not be able to deal with it because I rarely question the things around me--but this book proves that even if you are more of a simple minded person, you can still wrap your thoughts around certain things that Socrates questions that today still have no specific definitions. It is a thin book, with few pages, but it is full of a lot of knowledgeable ideas and concepts that do take some re-reading to fully comprehend Socrate's methods. I highly recommend this book!

Well pleased! Thanks.

Thank you

just as described

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