Chapter 4
Who Cares About Identity?

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Abstract This paper argues that transworld identity is both morally (or at least “welfare axiologically”) and prudentially insignificant. To clarify, it does not in itself morally or prudentially matter, when comparing welfare distributions across possible worlds, whether or not the same people exist in these worlds. The moral claim is defended on the basis of a (wide) person-affecting moral principle. And the argument is made that what matters from one’s own prudential point of view is not that one comes into existence or continues to exist oneself but that an appropriate continuer/replacement does. Finally, some implications for gene-therapy are considered.

Keywords Personal identity · Non-identity problem · Person-affecting ethics · Gene-therapy.

4.1 Introduction

Identity, in various ways, is often thought to have great importance for normative theory. Some of these ways concern identity in the qualitative sense of the term. In this sense, two objects, a and b, are identical to the extent that they have the same properties. This is the sense in which two exactly similar cars, or identical twins, are identical. This sense of the term should be contrasted with identity in the numerical sense. In the numerical sense, two objects, a and b, are identical if and only if they are in fact one and the same object. Thus, while identical twins may have many properties in common, they are not one and the same person and so they are not numerically identical. My concern in this paper is with numerical identity only. Or, more precisely, I am concerned with identity in the qualitative sense only to the extent it may affect identity in the numerical sense.
Therefore, my discussion differs from most contemporary discussions of the normative significance of identity, since these do not concern—or at least are not plausibly understood as discussions of—identity in the numerical sense. Consider, for instance, discussions in political philosophy over the cultural and national identities of individuals or of groups. It is with respect to these discussions that Kwame Anthony Appiah speaks of “the contemporary use of ‘identity’ to refer to such features of people as their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, or sexuality”; and adds that “this use of the term reflects the conviction that each person’s identity—in the older sense of who he or she truly is—is deeply inflected by such social features.”

While, for instance, a person’s nationality, religion and sexuality may be extremely important for her and her sense of who she is and she may speak of a “loss of identity” or “identity crisis” if they are threatened, this is not because she would literally cease to exist if she were to lose them. And when nationalists and multiculturalists speak of the importance of (recognising) people’s national and cultural identities, the point is simply that such identities are important to people or groups because they secure for them important values such as, for instance, social cohesion, solidarity and options.

However, as I said, my concern here is with numerical identity (and henceforth, I shall take “identity” to refer to the numerical sense of the term). I shall argue that, in various ways in which it is usually or often thought important, identity is in fact normatively insignificant. Further, I shall make such claims about both the prudential and the moral importance of identity. Here, prudence concerns a person’s self-interest, where to say that someone has a self-interest in something is, roughly, to say that this something will be valuable for her. More precisely, the object of a self-interest is a benefit (welfare), which is what ultimately gives prudential value to a person’s life. Thus, as I use the term “self-interest” here, a theory about self-interest is a theory about (prudential) value rather than, for instance, about (practical) rationality.

Unlike prudence, morality includes an (in some sense) equal concern for everyone. The part of morality I shall be concerned with here is the part that concerns the goodness of distributions of individual welfare. Thus, my concern is with what we might call “welfare axiology.” Furthermore, I shall primarily be concerned with person-affecting moralities, that is, moralities that cash out the concern for welfare in terms of what is good and bad (or better and worse) for individuals. Such moralities should be contrasted with impersonal moralities, according to which welfare is good, period, independently of whether it renders an individual better off than she otherwise would have been. To clarify the difference between impersonal and person-affecting morality, suppose (contrary to what I shall argue in the following) that it cannot benefit or harm a person to come into existence. In that case, according to a person-affecting morality, it cannot add to the value of an outcome to cause a further happy person to exist, because coming into existence cannot be good or better for her. According to an impersonal morality, on the other hand, the welfare this person will experience may contribute to the value of the outcome.

Another distinction I need to introduce is that between identity over time and transworld identity. This is because I shall make claims about the insignificance of...