PERSONAL IDENTITY, REDUCTIONISM AND THE NECESSITY OF ORIGINS

ABSTRACT. A thought that we all entertain at some time or other is that the course of our lives might have been very different from the way they in fact have been, with the consequence that we might have been rather different sorts of persons than we actually are. A less common, but prima facie intelligible thought is that we might never have existed at all, though someone rather like us did. Arguably, any plausible theory of personal identity should be able to accommodate both possibilities. Certain currently popular Reductionist theories of personal identity, however, seem to be deficient in precisely this respect. This paper explores some Reductionist responses to that challenge.

1.

We begin with a rather interesting exchange recorded in a celebrated eighteenth century text: the Memoirs of the well-known Venetian writer and adventurer Giovanni Giacomo Casanova. Casanova’s notoriety and considerable personal charm seem to have ensured that at one time or other he managed to meet almost everyone of note in the Europe of his day. One such luminary was the early Neoclassicist painter Anton Raphael Mengs, widely regarded in his lifetime as the greatest living painter. Casanova was for a time Mengs’ house guest in Madrid and he recalls Mengs as a man given to intense passions, including a passion for metaphysics – a subject for which Casanova (a self-described “philosopher”) judges him to have had no talent. In evidence for this judgement Casanova offers the following report of an exchange between them:

I expressed my warm approval of the excellent way in which he had spoken. He was not so sensible another time, when he expressed a wish to have been Raphael.

“He was such a great painter.”

“Certainly,” said I, “but what can you mean by wishing you had been Raphael? That is not sense; if you had been Raphael, you would no longer be existing. But perhaps you only meant to express a wish that you were tasting the joys of Paradise; in that case I will say no more.”

“No, no; I mean I would have liked to have been Raphael, without troubling myself about existing now, either in soul or body.”

“Really such a desire is an absurdity; think it over, and you will see it for yourself.”

He flew into a rage and abused me so heartily that I could not help laughing.¹

Unfortunately the terms of the debate are underdescribed; but it is rather difficult to see quite why Casanova thinks Mengs’ desire such an “absurdity” (i.e., presumably somehow logically incoherent). Of course, if Mengs is expressing a desire to have been identical with Raphael while at the same time identical with someone else (Mengs) who was non-identical with Raphael, then he would indeed be asking for the impossible. But surely this is an uncharitable interpretation of his desire. Mengs wants to be Raphael because Raphael was such a great painter. However the property of being a great painter like Raphael is likely to be holistically determined by relations it bears to an indeterminate number of other properties also possessed by Raphael. Thus the surest way to ensure that Mengs is a great painter like Raphael would be for Mengs and Raphael just to swap all their properties. Of course, one property of Mengs’ that Raphael could not exchange with the corresponding property of his own would be the property of being Mengs; similarly for any properties that entail being Mengs or being Raphael. But otherwise it seems quite possible that they could swap all their other properties, including those relevant to being a great painter like Raphael, and hence it is coherent to suppose that, in this sense, Mengs could have been Raphael.

If Casanova thinks that such a property swap is an impossibility, then presumably it is because he is committed to some sort of essentialist theory about persons that precludes this. But if this is so, then perhaps the moral to be drawn is that this is just so much the worse for Casanova’s implicit theory. For the prospect of Mengs being born where and when Raphael was and having all Raphael’s properties and experiences seems at least logically possible, i.e., not a self-contradictory supposition, and one discernibly different from the actual state of affairs. Thus any plausible theory of personal identity is presumably going to have to accommodate this possibility. As we shall see, however, certain currently popular theories of personal identity seem to be deficient in precisely this respect.

Of course, we must be careful not to overstate the case here. To make sense of the possibility Mengs is alluding to we have to assume that he (i.e., Mengs) could have been Raphael. This in turn seems to require that the “he” refers not to the human being Mengs, but to some bare particular – a featureless Cartesian ego, perhaps – which is what Mengs really is and which might have inhabited Raphael’s body before inhabiting Mengs’. Granted, many contemporary philosophers would consider such a suggestion counterintuitive. However, it is presumably still an open question whether such a possibility is coherent, especially if it is apparently implied by something that has seemed to make sense to many people: viz. that our