

Indexical Thisness as a Basic Property¹

Some of my friends and I share a common experience. It is one which I think you might share. Most of us have had an experience where we are struck by just how peculiar it is that we are the person that we are and not someone else. For me it sometimes happens in the morning after a dream. Why is it that I'm me and not my mother? Or my father? Or George W. Bush? Why is it that I do not possess their experiences rather than mine? Why was I not born in another person's body, reared by their parents and why haven't I lived their lives? In these moments, I seem to be aware of a kind of radical contingency that undergirds my connection to my present body, personality, and past. On many occasions I can sensibly entertain what it would be like for *me* to be *someone else*. But clearly, *I* can't be someone else, since I'm *me*. But there is *something* that it would be like for me to be aware *as me* of *being you*. It seems that I could possess all of another person's physical properties, history, genes, memories, etc. *and yet remain me*.

But what good are such intuitions? Perhaps they're entirely unreliable. On the other hand, these conceivability intuitions may just be the result of a reliable faculty for making conceivability judgments that we philosophers appeal to all the time; even these conceivability intuitions may have metaphysical implications. Saying what some of those implications are is the goal of my paper. My thesis is that we possess some property that is essential to our identity. I name the property in question *indexical thisness*. I will argue that this property supervenes neither on physical properties nor on mental properties. The property is *basic, brute* in a manner of speaking. I will argue that the instantiation of this property is a contingent matter, and I will reflect on how its instantiation might come about. For now I will proceed in three steps. First I will outline what indexical thisness is. Next, I will argue that it is basic. And finally I will examine an advantage and an objection to my view.

I. Defining Indexical Thisness

If the intuitions I've pointed are a reliable guide to genuine metaphysical possibility, then there are possible worlds in which *I am you* and *you are me* in a certain sense. The sense will be that we can exchange a very large number of our properties and yet maintain personal identity. To see this, let's start with physical properties. This means that there is a possible world in which I possess all of your physical properties and you possess all of my physical properties. And not just at any particular time-slice, but we possess all of each other's physical properties for all the time-slices where we exist.²

To show that I might be you and vice versa, we have to talk about more than just physical properties though; we have to discuss the possible exchange of mental properties too. Presumably if we can exchange physical properties, then we can exchange at least some mental ones. So I will have all of your experiences in this world, and you will have mine. We'll also exchange beliefs, and perhaps even desires. So we have the same set of qualia properties and propositional attitudes. There is a twist here, however. Our propositional attitudes and qualia will have the same *content*, but they may be different attitudes. Beliefs, desires, and qualia are *my* beliefs, *my* desires, and *my* qualia and *your* beliefs, *your* desires, and *your* qualia. In other words, it seems like mental properties are

¹ I would like to thank Richard Swinburne and Nathan Ballantyne for many helpful comments on this paper.

² This still holds even if we die at different times. I can have the property of dying in 2042 instead of you and you can have the property of dying in 2060 rather than me.

essentially indexed to a subject. But clearly we can switch beliefs in a certain sense. In this way, I can possess the content of your beliefs, desires, and qualia.

If two persons can possibly exchange their mental and physical properties, then what is left for a person to consist in? What's left is a kind of *existential nub*; a property that somehow *tracks* me in whatever possible world in which I have membership. Indexical thisness is the metaphysical equivalent of a rigid designator. It's a property that tracks and constitutes me in every possible world in which I exist. Here is how I will define indexical thisness ('IT' hereafter) then:

Indexical Thisness ('IT'): A property or set of properties which tracks a person-simpliciter in every possible world in which that person exists.

I use the term 'person-simpliciter' to just denote a person stripped of all the properties that might be exchanged with another without a loss of personal identity. Also, I take properties to be properties of objects composed of certain parts. A person is an object composed of parts then, and possesses IT essentially. I want to remain neutral about what sort of parts a person is composed of. This paper attempts to be neutral between whether a person has only material parts, only immaterial parts, or some combination of the two. For the purposes of this paper, I will take objects as primitive.

We often think that a person's personality is essential to her; people are often thought to be defined by their traits. Perhaps having a particular fully developed human person requires a personality of a certain sort, but the core of that person's identity does not. IT is certainly a necessary condition for a full human self, but I do not know whether it is sufficient. That is not my concern here. I wish only to say what IT is, and what connection it has to familiar aspects of the actual world.

II. Does Indexical Thisness supervene?

In this section, I will address three questions:

- a) Does IT supervene on some physical property or properties?
- b) Does IT supervene on some mental property or properties?
- c) Need IT supervene at all?

If what I have claimed in the first section is correct, the answer to all three questions is "No." I will now provide arguments to this effect.

Iia. Does IT supervene on physical properties?

IT does not supervene on physical properties. Here is the argument:

- 1) If IT supervenes on a physical property, then IT will at least nomologically supervene on a physical property.
- 2) If IT nomologically supervenes on a physical property, then IT tracks a physical property in every possible world with the same physical laws.
- 3) It is not that case that IT tracks a physical property in every possible world with the same physical laws.
- 4) It is not the case that IT supervenes on any physical property.

Premise 3 needs the most defense. The main argument for it consists in a conceivability intuition. Here's an argument:

- 5) If IT tracks a physical property in every possible world with the same physical laws, then IT is instantiated whenever³ that physical property is.
- 6) IT is not instantiated whenever a particular physical property is.
- 7) Therefore, IT does not track a physical property in every possible world with the same laws.

The defense of 5 is simple. For any nomologically possible world, the *duplication* of most physical property instances is possible. Redness, if it can be instantiated once, can be instantiated twice. Being 4 inches tall is the same way. Any plausible supervenience base for IT is presumably similarly duplicable⁴. Premise 6 is more complicated. Imagine that an alien scientist take all of your physical properties and their relations to one another and duplicate them. Would this person be you? Or would it be a different person? It seems intuitive that this person would be distinct from you. If so, then IT is not multiply instantiable because a second instantiation of a physical property will not also instantiate IT.

One reply might be that this second duplicate is also you. But I submit that such a response does far too much damage to the definition of a person. Two physical bodies cannot be the same person. Perhaps this is not conceptually impossible, but it is somewhat counterintuitive.

Iib. Does IT supervene on mental properties?

Now for the second question: Does IT supervene on any mental property? For those who believe that mental properties are identical with physical ones, the answer will be evident. If IT doesn't supervene on a physical property, but all mental properties are physical properties, then IT will not supervene on any mental property either.

Suppose though that one denies mind-body identity. What should the defender of a basic IT-property say? To answer this question, we should first decide what it is that count as distinctly mental properties. I answer that all mental properties fall into two categories: conscious properties and intentional properties. Perhaps there are other mental properties that aren't *merely* conscious or intentional (say, particular insights, or reasoning processes), but any mental property will be *at least* either a conscious property or an intentional property. So, we can now refine our question: Does IT supervene on any particular conscious property or intentional property?

To answer this question, we should distinguish between two aspects of mental properties. One aspect is the *content* of conscious and intentional states. The content of a conscious state is usually said to be a quale, and the content of an intentional state is usually said to be a proposition. The other aspect is that certain qualia and propositional attitudes are *possessed*, meaning that they are indexed to subjects. There's 'my red quale' and 'my belief' and 'my wants', etc. IT seems clearly not to supervene on the first aspect because different individuals can share the same conscious and intentional content. But

³ 'Whenever' here just refers to any conceivable instantiation; it's not merely a temporal relation.

⁴ Of course, there are physical properties that aren't duplicable. Take the 'the largest planet in the universe' property. It can only be instantiated once in a single world. But presumably no property of this sort is a plausible supervenience base for IT.

what of the second aspect? To me it seems wrong to say that IT supervenes on the second aspect. Instead these properties supervene on IT. My beliefs, desires and experiences are indexed to *me* and not to anyone else. IT then seems to make the possession of mental properties possible and not the other way around.

It's worth pointing out that it is perfectly possible that I lack any of the experiences or propositional attitudes that I have had, as I assume it is nomologically possible that I didn't have the experiences I have had and I didn't possess the propositional attitudes that I have come to possess. In this respect it seems that IT can survive in possible worlds in which potentially any one of my experiences or propositional attitudes is different. One might complain that I have made a fallacy of composition here. Just because I might lack any of my experiences or propositional attitudes do not mean that I might lack all of them. But I argue that indeed one might lack all of them. Presumably one is still a person prior to the formation of any propositional attitudes and the having of any experiences at birth, skirting issues of pre-birth personhood. And most likely there are nomologically possible worlds in which I exist and yet have a different upbringing entirely. If this is so, then IT does not supervene on any mental property.

Iic. If IT doesn't supervene, then what kind of entity is an IT-instance?

So it looks like IT doesn't supervene. But how could it not? If IT doesn't supervene, then it must be, in some way, a basic or brute feature of the universe. In other words, personal identity cannot be fully captured by mental and physical properties, and it is metaphysically possible that IT exists without them. IT will be a feature of persons that is not entailed by any of that person's other properties. I won't address the issue here of whether physical or mental properties are necessary conditions for IT, but I want to say something about what IT must involve if it is to exist at all.

First I should point out that the ontological status of IT does not directly map onto debates between physicalists and dualists. The issue between the two views is whether physical properties and mental properties are identical, or more generally, whether certain supervenience relations hold between them. This will not bear directly on IT, for IT supervenes on neither mental nor physical properties.

What I want to say about IT can be outlined by answering three questions:

- i) Are instances of IT necessarily or contingently instantiated?
- ii) If instances of IT are contingent, do they have a beginning?
- iii) If instances of IT are contingent, then how might they come into being?

An instance of IT will be necessary if it is instantiated in every possible world. But it seems perfectly possible that any one human person might not have existed. So, not every instance of IT necessarily exists. At least some, if not all are contingent. It would seem every instance of IT is contingent, unless one has some reason to think that there exist one or more necessary personal beings in existence, which some of us might. For now, I want to bracket this issue. I am interested in the source of contingent instances of IT.

Question 2 raises further questions. I have no way to rule out that I have always existed. But it seems obvious that I came into existence sometime between conception and birth. Perhaps the existence of a person pre-exists conception, but my inclination is to think

that this will in some way violate the necessary conditions placed on the instantiation of IT by mental and physical properties. To me it seems the capacity to possess some physical and mental properties are both necessary but not sufficient to instantiate IT. So in other words, to instantiate IT, an object must also possess the capacity to instantiate mental and physical properties, say the potentiality carried by a fetus or a comatose person.⁵

I cannot say too much here with how instances of IT are instantiated. Here is something that I want to claim, though: Instances of IT cannot be brought about by the regular operation of psychological or physical laws. These laws alone are not sufficient for instantiating IT. In fact, it appears to be the case that if physical laws are those that cover the instantiation of physical properties, that there will be no physical or law-like explanation for the instantiation of IT, as IT does not supervene on physical properties. This seems to leave us with few options unless we are willing to grant that an IT may be instantiated by some sort of personal cause, like God or contingent, purely mental beings.

What is IT, then? IT is a brute mode of existence. Personhood, of which IT is an essential feature, is not reducible to non-personal properties. Individual persons are often if not always contingent beings that are likely brought into being (in part) by whatever is responsible for instantiating IT and putting together body and mind. There is also some mode of combining these properties into a whole, as it clearly occurs, no matter how mysterious it might seem.

I speculated earlier (in section IIb) that mental properties may supervene on IT. Perhaps IT is a necessary condition for personal mentality; IT would be required to have mental *capacities*, even if the necessary conditions for exercising those powers were not present. In this way, IT could be an essential component of either a Cartesian, Thomistic, or Aristotelian view of the soul. On the Cartesian view, physical properties are neither necessary nor sufficient for personhood. On the Thomistic and Aristotelian views, physical properties are necessary but not sufficient for personhood⁶. Mental properties are necessary conditions for personhood in both pictures, but they needn't be *actualized* mental properties, but rather an instance of IT need only be conceptually linked to the *potential* to bring about mental activity. The concept of IT I have outlined underdetermines which of these options is correct.

Interestingly, the constraints on instantiating IT also allow for an interesting additional option. One might be a reductionist about mental properties or a non-reductive physicalist about mental properties and yet not a reductionist about IT instances.

⁵ One might object that we can conceive of ourselves existing without a body. But I believe that what we are imagining here is not a brute instance of IT, but rather a bodiless soul with a robust mental life instantiating IT, in other words an object that is composed entirely of immaterial parts. IT instances won't pre-exist the parts of the object that instantiates them. I believe this is possible, but it seems to me to make the body a rather superfluous aspect of our existence. Nonetheless, in the picture I'm outlining, this is still a possibility. Possessing physical capacities is very likely a nomologically necessary condition for instantiating IT, and conceivability intuitions about the broad, metaphysical possibility of a bodiless example aren't incompatible with such a position.

⁶ I am aware that Thomas holds that the soul can exist without a body in purgatory. However, I continue to claim that a person cannot exist without a body because of his claim that the soul is not the same thing as a human being.

I hope that what I have said here has helped to clarify just what sort of property we're talking about when we discuss what makes us essentially who we are. Discussions of personhood can defend IT, revise IT, or eliminate IT. Perhaps IT serve as a kind of signpost to navigate the issues of personal identity. In the next section, I will respond to potential objections to my understanding of IT.

III. Objections

My guess is that most objections to the arguments I have given will insist that I have played too fast and loose with conceivability intuitions. Let me construct an example of such an objection.

Paul Bloom is a developmental psychologist at Yale. He has a theory about why the sort of views I'm setting out here seem so natural to people⁷. His argument is that we have developed two distinct systems for understanding other human beings. One system imputes mental states to human bodies. The other system is for understanding human bodies as physical objects. These systems faced partially independent evolutionary pressures and allow us to think of a single human being in two distinct modes –as a mind, or as a body. Bloom marshals a great deal of evidence to defend his view. If his view is true, one may attempt to explain away our intuitions by saying that we have these sorts of intuitions as the natural offshoot of our reasoning system for the minds of others and nothing more. The natural thing to wonder is whether these sorts of intuitions have any real metaphysical import given his explanation. Sure, we can imagine ourselves without bodies, or with shifting physical properties, but that is because the brain works that way. It has nothing to do with reality as it really is.

I cannot decisively refute this objection, but I can say that I don't think it bears directly on the question at hand. The real question raised here is as follows: How closely involved are our modal concepts in rational inference? This is the question because nobody thinks that the argument given above would work to show that *rational inference itself* has no metaphysical implications. We have evolved reason, but of course *our reasoning capacity* can lead us to make true metaphysical claims. The problem is that the above story only tells how we came to possess this rational capacity, and says nothing about its metaphysical import. So why not think likewise about our modal concepts? We find ourselves equipped with two different modes of thinking about the human person, and yet this is rather convenient for us *as there really is a difference between a human person and her body*. The Bloomian objection would only have fangs if one granted that our modal concepts were far enough removed from rational inference to be a mere artifact of evolution rather than an integral part of our connection to reality. But if one believes that our basic modal judgments are rational and have metaphysical implications, then I think I have made valid arguments with true premises to true conclusions.

IV. A Further Note About IT

The defender of a basic IT property actually has an advantage in debates over personal identity. If our conceivability intuitions are indicators of genuine metaphysical possibilities, then it seems IT can explain why sometimes our intuitions about personal

⁷ Bloom, P. (2004). *Descartes' Baby: How the science of child development explains what makes us human*. New York: Basic Books.

identity conflict. Suppose IT doesn't supervene on mental or physical properties. The standard questions about split-brain cases, teleportation, etc. will not have answers in the same way philosophers imagine. Instantiations of IT are *contingent* on the view of IT I defend. When we ask questions about what *must* happen in cases of brain surgery, teleportation, and the like, we should, on my view, *expect* to receive conflicting answers because it *isn't a conceptual matter what happens*. It's up to some *contingent* factor, perhaps even the contingent will of a personal being. So we can't reasonably expect our intuitions to track when an instance of IT will be instantiated. Conceivability intuitions identify conceptual truths, not empirical facts. If one adopts the view of IT instances as contingent instantiations not wholly covered by physical or psycho-physical laws, then it is reasonable to find that philosophers have such divergent intuitions about the metaphysical implications of split-brain cases, teleportation, etc. We should not be surprised that philosophers see different possibilities that seem irresolvable based on purely metaphysical argumentation. In other words, the way this paper advocates understanding IT *explains* other sets of disagreements in the field.

V. Conclusion

What I've tried to do in this paper is to outline the core concept of personal identity, what I have called 'Indexical Thisness' ('IT'). IT is, more or less, the metaphysical equivalent of a rigid designator. It is that property or a set of properties that tracks you in every possible world in which you exist. I argued that IT doesn't supervene on physical properties or mental properties and that instead mental properties supervene on IT. We have the outlines of a proposal for a kind of soul, be one a materialist or a dualist about mental properties.

Kevin Vallier
University of Arizona
January 1st, 2006