

Przemysław Paleczny: „The problem of identity of the self in the perspective of the conceptual relativity thesis”

We experience ourselves all the time, both in the psychic realm (e.g. by realizing that our will is weak) and in the physical sphere (e.g. when suffering from illness). These daily experiences raise a number of philosophical problems, amongst which analytical philosophy paid particular attention to the so-called survival problem. We all change from day to day, more or less physically and mentally, therefore can we say that we are still the same person? On what basis do we state that a person who committed a crime many years ago is the same person who is sentenced today? What determines that the person we identified in the past is the same person we identify today?

This research project is based on the thesis that we perceive personal identity differently if taken from the third person perspective, i.e. from the viewer's perspective, and differently when taken from the first person perspective, i.e. from the perspective of the actor, when we are the subject of identity ourselves, the entity. The viewer may have information about an entity, which the actor does not hold (e.g. when the subject is in a coma) and vice versa, the actor may have information which the viewer does not hold (e.g. they remember events from their childhood of which the viewer is not aware). And yet the viewer and the actor speak of the same entity, so their views must be complementary.

The project was conceived as an attempt to capture the problem of personal identity in the perspective of the pragmatic trend in philosophy, which in its methodology, according to William James' recommendation, rejects the spectator's point of view, in which the world is treated as ready-made thing, an object of contemplation. Instead, the central role is played by the actor's point of view, which takes the world as a field of action, and relativizes its cognition to agent's interest. Therefore, the main problem of the project, unlike the survival problem, is not formed in the third, but the first person perspective: What is the basis of our distinction between oneself and her states on one side and all what is not oneself on the other? This problem can be called the problem of the identity of the self. Despite the complementarity of both perspectives, many of the solutions formed in the spectator's perspective must be insufficient for an actor operating in the environment.

Psychological reductionism takes mental continuity as the basis of identity. If a person today maintains mental continuity with the person who is committed a robbery yesterday, then today's person is the same as yesterday's criminal – this is the same person. However, the criterion of mental continuity is often unreliable due to numerous mental disorders, such as amnesia, which can interrupt mental continuity. It shows that although in the actor's perspective memory can play a significant role as a determinant of identity, this criterion turns out to be illusive, and it may be necessary to refer to the complementary perspective of the viewer in order to determine the identity.

Due to the fact that our the brain is the center of our mental abilities, psychological reductionism sometimes responds to the fact that the basis of personal identity is the brain. However, even omitting many theoretical cases such as transplantation or brain fission, this criterion turns out to be impractical in the first person perspective, since in the actor's experience, his brain merely does not appear.

Physiological reductionism, in turn, states that the basis of personal identity should be found in the identity of the body or biological organism. In the latter case, the brain is perceived as an organ in a complex organism, therefore brain transplantation does not mean transplanting a person – similarly to a kidney transplantation. However, this position seems to miss some of the important issues in the discussion. The question of personal identity is a question about the identity of a person, not of a body of any kind, e.g. the brain is interesting because it seems to be the physical basis of mental attributes. Hence, even if one identifies the body with that of the person, the question remains: What makes a particular body the body of a particular person? What makes some bodies so special?

The main thesis of the research project is that the fundamental function of the mind which is the perception of unity in experience, is the basis of personal identity. Basing on the sense of unity of experience, the entity forms a sense of self-identity. Since a part of one's experience is interaction with other actors who experience that one in the spectator's perspective, the view on the same one in both perspectives is shaped parallel, mutually conditioning and creating complementarity of the perspectives.

The present proposal puts the discussion on personal identity in a new, pragmatic framework, so that to shed a new light on the fundamental question of the human being: “Who am I?”. This opens new prospects in the debate, and may significantly contribute to the self-knowledge of modern human.