UNIT 11: SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1. Learning objectives

11.2. Introduction: Self- knowledge meaning

11. 3. The criterion of personal identity with special reference to Locke and Bernard Williams

11.3.1. The Criterions of Personal Identity

11.3.2. The physical criterion of personal identity:

11.4. Hume's concept of self-knowledge and personal identity

11.5. Let us sum up

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11.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- explain the meaning of self-knowledge,
- explain and differentiate the two main criterions of personal identity,
- discuss the meaning of mental connectedness and physical connectedness in reference to personal identity,
- explain Hume's idea about personal identity.

11.2. INTRODUCTION: THE MEANING OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

In philosophy, "self-knowledge" means knowledge of one's own sensations, thoughts, beliefs, and other mental states. Self is understood in terms of some internal existence. Mind is devoid of all physical characteristics. It does not have any color, shape or structure. To speak of mind is very difficult without body. Descartes introduced the rationalistic

approach and Locke introduced the empiricist approach. Barkley confined that whatever is perceived.

In philosophy, self-knowledge usually means 1. Knowledge of one's particular mental states or knowledge of one's own nature. To have self-knowledge in the first of these senses is to know one's particular sensations, experiences, and propositional attitudes (beliefs, desires, and so on). 2. To have self-knowledge in the second sense is to know one's own ontological nature, or less abstract characteristics, such as one's own character, abilities, or values.

11.3. THE CRITERION OF PERSONAL IDENTITY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO LOCKE AND BERNARD WILLIAMS

This unit introduces you to the idea of personal identity. From the point of metaphysics, Personal identityis the problem of the nature of the identity of persons and their persistence through time.One makes a judgment of personal identity whenever one says that a person existing at one time is the same as a person existing at another time.Matters of great importance often turn on the truth of such judgments. Whether someone should be punished for a crime, for example, depends on whether he is the person who committed it, and whether someone is the owner of something now may depend on whether he is the person who purchased it at some past time. Whether there is personal immortality, or survival of death, depends on whether a person who dies can be identical with a person existing next to that person's death. Personal identity forms an important part of contemporary epistemology.The word 'identify' has two senses-To pick out and to recognize. Identification in the first sense may be called individuation. In the second sense it involves the judgment that two individuations are of one and the same person. The philosophical problem of personal identity is the problem of finding the basis in which an individual is regarded as the same person in spite of the changes. The problem of personal identity is connected with answering a basic question - what is it

to remain one and the same person over a period of time. Everyone changes during his or her life time. Occasionally we meet an individual after a gap of many years and are amazed to know that he or she is the same person we met years ago. This experience is connected with the philosophical problem of personal identity. Locke was one of the first philosophers who discussed the question of personal identity in certain details. He pointed out that there are differences between soul, person and man (woman). What does it mean to remain the same soul, to remain the same person and to remain the same man or woman are three different problems. In order to clarify the concept of personal identity Lockeconducted certain tough experiments also.

11.3.1. The Criterions of Personal Identity

Mainly there are two accepted criterions of personality. According to one view the criterion of personal identity is mental and on the other view accepts bodily identity as main criterion. If one holds that the mind can exist apart from the body, one would not make bodily identity a necessary condition of personal identity. In Cartesian dualism it is held that the body and the mind are mutually independent realities. So in Cartesian dualism bodily identity is not regarded to be a component of personal identity. But many philosophers tend to believe that personal identity involves both bodily identity and mental connectedness.

Many philosophers have adopted different approaches to personal identity. Wittgenstein was fully aware of the complexity of the problem of personal identity. Locke, Bernard Williams, Hume have offered different view regarding the idea of personal identity. Wittgensteinalso hold that our actual use of the fact that many characteristics which we use as the criteria to identify coincide here. So for Wittgenstein personal identity refers to not just to one criterion of identification. It refers to a number of criteria of identification. All these criteria converge and make possible the factors called personal identity. This is the impression that we get from Wittgenstein's The Blue and Brown Books (page 61). In this way

philosophers have made various attempts to clarify the concept of personal identity.

So there are two section regarding the question of the criterion of personalidentity. One section believes that the criterion of personal identity is mental and the other section believes that it is physical. Here we will try to see two different vies of two different philosophers.

The criterion of personal identity is mental : In Locke proposes that a conscious awareness of one's past, the like of which is contained in an individual's memory, is the key to identifying an individual at two different moments as the self same. According to Locke the privileged access that memory grants to an individual is the only clearly recognizable phenomena, cognitive or otherwise, which can tie an individual into one self same substance over time.

As Locke says:

..."tis plain consciousness, as far as it ever can be extended, should it be into Ages, unites v Existences, and Actions, very remote in time, into the same Person, as well as it does the Existence and proceeding moment: So that whatever has the consciousness of present and past Actions, is the same Person to whom they belong" (Locke, 2008; p.213)

Locke, for the first time in modern philosophy stated that the criterion of personal identity is mental. Locke sought to define personal identity in terms of mental connectedness. According to Locke to be the same person is to have the same set of memory. This idea was presented by Locke by considering the idea of the transmigration of the soul. According to Locke the soul is nothing other than the immaterial substratum. Our thoughts, feelings, desires, hopes, wishes etc are to belong to something. That something to which they belong, that something in which they inhere is the soul. We have only a vague idea of this immaterial substratum. Locke asked what would follow if his immaterial substratum inhabited the body of Socrates. Would it make him the same person as Socrates even though he

could remember nothing of the life of Socrates? Locke argued that he could not be regarded as Socrates reborn. There must be a mental connectedness if we are to find the rebirth of Socrates, I would have been Socrates in a previous birth if I could remember the past life of Socrates as Socrates would have remembered it. But because I cannot do that therefore I am not Socrates reborn. Because Locke cannot do that therefore Locke is not Socrates reborn. But if I have mental connectedness with Socrates, if I remember the past life of Socrates as Socrates would have remembered it then I am Socrates. A person will be the same person existing at an earlier time even with a different body if only he or she is conscious of the action of that person. Such a consciousness is theoretically possible in resurrection. In resurrection, Locke pointed out, the body may not be the same but there will be mental connectedness and this is enough for personal identity. Though memory criterion of personal identity is an important criterion yet on a number of grounds it is criticized. Some arguments against this view are -

1. **Keeping the same body:** Bertrand Russell wrote about an individual who was stating that Napoleon was not dead. When Russell asked for proof the man braced himself up and said, "Because I am Napoleon. Suppose someone remembers the life of Napoleon as Napoleon would have himself would have remembered it. In that case there would be a mental connectedness between the person and the Napoleon. By following the memory criterion of personal identity we would say that the person is Napoleon himself. Let us call this person A. we find another person who also remembers the life of Napoleon as Napoleon would have remembered it. Let us call this person B. by following memory criterion we will have to say that B is also napoleon. In this case A is identical with napoleon and b is also identical with Napoleon. But A is not identical with B. they are two different individuals. This situation implied that the memory criterion of personal identity cannot be the correct criterion. This is a very convincing argument. Philosophers like Reid, Bernard Williams and A.R Lacey employed this argument.

2. **Forgetting one's past:** It is possible to forget the past. There are many parts of my life which as a matter of fact I cannot remember. For example I cannot remember my birth. I cannot remember anything that happened to me till I was nearly 3 years old. There are many incidents that happened to me much later which I don't remember. But it does not mean that I was not then the same person as I am now. So there is a factor called forgetting the past. I may forget the past and may lack the required mental connectedness with the past. But still I will be the same person. This factor of forgetting the past cannot be accounted for by the theory which accepts the memory criterion.

3. **Presupposition and circularity:** The charge that the memory criterion of personal identity involves the fallacy of personal circular reasoning was first put forwarded by Bishop Butler, who was a critic of Locke. Butler stated that the memory criterion presupposes personal identity and therefore it cannot be said that the mental connectedness constitutes personal identity.

LET US KNOW



Locke attempted to understand personal identity in terms of mental relationship. Hume attempted to dissolve the idea of personal identity. In his philosophy personal identity cannot be anything other than fictitious identity. Bernard Williams held that bodily identity is an important component of personal identity.

11.3.2 The physical criterion of personal identity

According to this view personal identity is not a matter of mental connectedness. According to this view to be the same person is to maintain the same body of course with renewed materials. Locke tried to explain personal identity in terms of mental connectedness. But philosophers like Thomas Reid, Bernard Williams and others tried to explain personal identity in terms of bodily identity. Bernard Williams and Thomas Reid offered certain

arguments against the mental criterion of personal identity and stated that personal identity cannot be anything other than continuation of the same body.Williams expresses that relation in "Bodily Continuity and Personal Identity" as follows:

"The principle of my argument is, very roughly put, that identity is a one-one relation, and that no principle can be a criterion of identity for things of type T if it relies only on what is logically a one-many or many-many relation between things of type T. What is wrong with the supposed criterion of identity for persons which relies only on memory claims is just that '... being disposed to make sincere memory claims which exactly fit the life of...' is not a one-one, but a many-one, relation, and hence cannot possibly be adequate in logic to constitute a criterion of identity. Thus, logically, identity is a one-one relation. Any criterion of identity that does not appeal to the one-one relation fails the test of being such a criterion. "

The argument of Bernard Williams is found in his famous essay "Personal Identity and Individuation." We may present this argument here in a slightly amended form. Students of British history are familiar with the name of Guy Fawkesof the notorious Gun Powder Plot, the plot of blowing up the English Parliament. George remembers being Guy Fawkes. He remembers the life of Guy Fawkes as Guy Fawkes himself would have remembered it. By following the memory criterion we shall have to say that George is the same person as Guy Fawkes. He is Guy Fawkesreborn. Let us now imagine another person who is Henry. Henry remembers the life of Guy Fawkes. Let us imagine, in the same way in which Guy Fawkeswould have remembered it. By following the memory criterion of personal identity we have to say that Henry is Guy FawkesAt this point a problem arises. George is identical with GuyFawkes. We may say that he is Guy Fawkesreborn. Henry is identical with GuyFawkes. By following the memory criterion we shall have to say that Guy Fawkes and George are the same persons. Again by following the same criterion we have to say that Guy Fawkes and Henry are same persons, But George is not identical with Henry. Why? Because while George has one body Henry has another body.

The bodily criterion of personal identity in this way comes to focus. We may say that having the same memory with Guy Fawkesmay be a necessary condition for being Guy Fawkes. But we cannot say that it is a sufficient condition for being Guy Fawkes. It seems that having the same body is a necessary condition for being Guy Fawkes or any other person. George is not the same person as Guy Fawkesbecause they have different bodies. Similarly Henry is not the same person as Guy Fawkes because they have different bodies. One may remember here that in Christianity there is vague awareness of the need of the continuation of the same body for the identification of the individual as the same person. The doctrine of bodily resurrection is an important part of that Christian dogma. It seems that the bodily criterion is assumed here. The view that personal identity is to be understood in terms of bodily continuity faced certain problems. Some of these problems were raised by the distinguished philosopher Sydney Shoemaker. Shoemaker's arguments are very powerful and they require special consideration where he talked about quasi -memory and defended Lockean psychological continuity theory in his influential paper "Persons and their Pasts". Again the bodily theory and the immaterial-substance theory was rejected by the 17th-century English philosopher John Locke in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689), which contained the first extended treatment of the topic in Western philosophy. Book II, chapter 27, of the Essay, "Of Identity and Diversity," introduces a famous example in which the soul of a prince, carrying with it consciousness of the prince's past life, is transferred to the body of a cobbler. Locke argued that the post-transfer cobbler-body person would be the same person as the prince, despite not having the prince's former body. He also held that consciousness can be transferred from one immaterial substance to another, so that the immaterial substance that was initially the mind of one person might become the mind of a different person.

LET US KNOW



Defenders of the psychological view, including Shoemaker, deny that they are committed to too many minds. Defenders also maintain that there is a good sense in which persons are animals, though not biologically individuated animals, and that animals in that sense can think. What they hold against animalism is the same as what Locke held against a similar view, the bodily theory: animalism is committed to rejecting the highly plausible intuition that in a brain transplant (or in a Lockean soul transfer) the person goes with the brain (or soul).

11.4. HUME'S CONCEPT OF SELF- KNOWLEDGE AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

Before knowing what Hume thinks about personal identity we should know what a self is and what does Hume means by ideas and impressions. For Hume mind is a theatre. According to Hume a momentary is a very short time. According to him, mind just enters and goes out. It is not a physical thing. He defines self in terms of perception and these perceptions are momentary in nature. A perception exists for a single moment only. They enters into the mind in a rapid succession. The idea of self is only a creation of our mind. So for him it is an imaginary thing. According to Hume, (a) knowledge comes from experience (b) experience has two sources- ideas and impressions. (c) Impressions are momentary, discrete, independent, and separable from each other. (d) Self can be defined as a substance.

But here Hume said that we do not have any impression corresponding to the idea of self. There cannot be any simple idea without an impression. Such an idea cannot be a simple idea. But such an idea must be a complex idea. A complex idea may be a golden idea. This complex idea may have truth content and reliability like self.

Personal identity stands for personal identification of the person. The name is not sufficient for one's identification. One must refer to others also like parents. But the problem is Hume asks what makes a person same or give him the same identity throughout the life? Throughout the life the man undergoes different changes like physical, mental, circumstantial, environmental, cultural etc. But the main question is- "What is that which accounts for the sameness of the person even in the midst of all the changes that he undergoes throughout his life? On the background of this question there is a pre-supposition that change and sameness cannot go together. They are not compatible. If they are identical then we will have to deny identity. Hume maintains that all our impressions are changing and momentary. There is no bond among them. So the question of the identity of a person is also not a real question. Hume says the personal identity is not a real thing. According to him, a person does not remain the same throughout his life. When the changes go on he or she is not the same person. Changes are so rapid that every moment we are changing. I am changing every moment so I am not the same person. Hume says that in reality there is no identity. Impressions come like the bogies of a train sorapidly that we impose that or think that this is the complete life. The only difference is the bogies of a train are connected with each other. But impressions are not connected. They are independent. This unification of impressions is only a fiction. So the concept of personal identity is a fiction. There is no bond among the perceptions also. Everything that we see that exist are perceptions. Beyond perception there is no perceiver and nothing perceived. But Hume's position is very queer. He said "I am a cluster of some perceptions only." Hume does not give any answer to the question what is there beyond perception. Only one's perception is real so a person is a cluster of perceptions. Hume's position is solipsist. This is the most important point of Hume's metaphysics. Fiction means imaginary things. Hume says that personal identity is not a real perception. It is a fiction. It is just an illusion or imagination or fiction. Hume uses the word imagination or fiction but never used the word illusion. What is the difference between the word illusion and imagination or fiction? Illusion is a word used by idealist

philosophers. In case of illusion we are passive spectators. When we perceive the rope as a snake it is a case of illusion. But imagination is different from it. In case of imagination things are not exact representations of the real. According to Hume the concept of personal identity is an imagination. It is not real. Drama, novel, short stories are fiction because these are created by imagination. But history is not a fiction. Hume did not conclude that world is fiction, although Hume was not satisfied with his own conclusion.

He wrote two important books-

1. A Treatise of Human Nature
2. An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.

Hume replaced the second book in place of the first one. Hume is self-critical. He was not satisfied with what he had said earlier in the first book (personal identity is a fiction). He doubted his own position. He says that the conclusion is not correct. He also says that he does not know how to correct it. In his first book's appendix he stated that he finds himself in a dilemma regarding the conclusion. Hume says that so far his knowledge is concerned he knows that he has not committed any mistake. He says his conclusion is not final. He found no satisfactory answer from himself. So he dropped the concept of personal identity from the second book. Hume starts with the assumption that changes and identity do not go together. If there is identity there is no changes. It is said that there is a permanent entity which is self, which does not undergo changes. But Hume denies the concept of self. So he denies the concept of personal identity. If there were a personal self then we account the personal identity. He committed a mistake when he started with the assumption that personal identity and changes cannot go together. Hume fails to take note of the point that there is no need of a permanent self in order to account for personal identity. Time is identical with changes. Time cannot be determined without change.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1 what do you mean by self-knowledge?

Q.2 what are the two main criterions of personal identity?

Q.3 Is Hume's position of personal identity falls within solipsism? If yes, then why?



11.5. LET US SUM UP

- Self-knowledge" means knowledge of one's own sensations, thoughts, beliefs, and other mental states. Self is understood in terms of some internal existence.
- Mainly there are two accepted criterions of personality. According to one view the criterion of personal identity is mental and on the other view accepts bodily identity as main criterion.
- Locke, for the first time in modern philosophy stated that the criterion of personal identity is mental.
- Philosophers like Thomas Reid, Bernard Williams and others tried to explain personal identity in terms of bodily identity. Bernard Williams and Thomas Reid offered certain arguments against the mental criterion of personal identity and stated that personal identity cannot be anything other than continuation of the same body.
- According to Hume, (a) knowledge comes from experience (b) experience has two sources- ideas and impressions. (c) Impressions are momentary, discrete, independent, and separable from each other. (d) Self can be defined as a substance.
- Hume's position is solipsist

- Hume is self-critical. He was not satisfied with what he had said earlier in the first book (personal identity is a fiction). He doubted his own position.



11.6. FURTHER READINGS

1) Perry, John. Personal Identity
2) Strawson, Locke on personal identity
3) Sterrett, S.G. Locke, memory and personal identity,
4) Locke, John. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding; Volumes 1-3
5) Williams, Bernard. Bodily Continuity and Personal Identity, Analysis, 1960. (Article)
6) Personal Identity (standford encyclopedia)



11.7. ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q. No.1: By self-knowledge we mean knowledge of one's own sensations, thoughts, beliefs, and other mental states.

Ans to Q.No.2: The two main criterion of personal identity are- 1. The mental criterion of personal identy. 2. The bodily criterion of personal identity.

Ans to Q.No.3: Yes, Hume's position is solipsist. Because he said "I am a cluster of some perceptions only." Only one's perception is real so a person is a cluster of perceptions.



11.8. MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very short Questions

Q.1 Name the philosopher who stated that the criterion of personal identity is mental.

Q.2 who is the author of the essay "Personal Identity and Individuation?"

Q.3 who is the Author of the Book "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding?"

Q.4 Write down the name of the two books written by Hume

B) Short Questions (answer in about 150-200 words)

Q.1 what do you mean by the mental criterion of personal identity?

Q.2 what do you mean by the bodily criterion of personal identity?

Q.3 Why Hume is said to be self-critical?

C) Long Questions (answer about 300-500 words)

Q.1 Explain Locke's position of personal identity.

Q.2. Explain Bernard Williams' position of the bodily criterion of personal identity

Q.3 Explain Hume's idea about personal identity.

Q.4 write the criticisms of Locke's theory of personal identity.

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