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# Imperfect Identity

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## 1.

That grass is green, that pigs don't fly, and that you are now awake are all hard facts. But there is often said to be something soft about matters of identity over time. Is today's village church the very church that was first built here, despite centuries of repairs and alterations? How many parts of my bicycle do I need to replace before I get a numerically different bike? If a club disbands and years later some of the original members start a similar club with the same name, have we got two clubs, or one club with a discontinuous history? It is tempting to say that there are no hard answers to these questions laid up in heaven. There is no determinate fact of the matter. Those who disagree about such things are arguing about words, not facts. We are free to say what we like.

Two hundred years ago Reid expressed this thought by saying that identity over time can be 'imperfect':

> The identity of objects of sense is never perfect....The identity which we ascribe to bodies, whether natural or artificial, is not perfect identity; it is rather something which, for the conveniency of speech, we call identity. It admits of a great change of the subject, providing the changes be gradual; sometimes, even of total change. And the changes which in common language are made consistent with identity differ from those that are thought to destroy it, not in kind, but in number and degree. It has no fixed nature when applied to bodies; and questions about the identity of a body are very often questions about words. (1785: 112)

Reid was not the first to have this idea, but I will adopt his phrase 'imperfect identity' as a name for it.

Whether there are cases where identity over time is not like this, but is fully determinate and robustly factual, is controversial. A long tradition has it that our own identity is perfect: Reid said, 'the identity of a person is a perfect identity: wherever it is real, it admits of no degrees; it is impossible that a person should be in part the same, and in part different' (1785: 111).

Philosophers nowadays are more inclined to say (as Hume did) that our own identity is no more perfect than that of anything else. But the claim that the identity over time of

at least some things in some circumstances is imperfect--call it the <u>imperfect-identity thesis</u>--appears to be widely regarded as a truism.  It is asserted without argument as if it were obvious.  Everyone is supposed to agree.

I find the notion of imperfect identity mysterious.  Here is what I will argue.  First, it is hard to see how the imperfect-identity thesis could be true.  If it is a claim about numerical identity, anyway, it faces grave objections.  Though there may appear to be ways of defending the thesis against these objections, these defences don't support the claim that identity itself is imperfect; at most they suggest that some other relation--one that we sometimes express using the language of identity--is imperfect.  Moreover, these ways of defending imperfect identity all appeal to contentious metaphysical claims.  So the view that identity itself is imperfect looks false, and whether something else that we may loosely call identity is imperfect is an interesting question.  No version of the imperfect-identity thesis is a harmless truism.

## 2.

What does it mean to say that identity over time is imperfect?  There are several possibilities.  Here are five of them.

One is that whether things existing at different times are identical can be indeterminate.  Today's village church may not definitely be the church that was built on the same site 600 years ago, but it may not definitely be a different one either.  The current church and the ancient church might be 'sort of' one and 'sort of' two.  They might be borderline-identical, just as Florian, who has some hair on his head but not much, might be borderline-bald.  No plausible account of what sorts of alterations a church could survive will ever be precise enough to deliver a definite verdict in all possible cases.  Call this the <u>indeterminacy thesis</u>.  A related claim is that identity over time comes in degrees:  things can be more or less identical.  Today's church may be identical with the village church of 1750 to a greater degree than it is identical with the village church of 1500, even though there is neither definite identity nor definite non-identity in either case--just as Ali can be more bald than Florian without being definitely bald.[1]

A second claim is that questions of identity over time may have no right answer.  If we know all the 'underlying' facts about how the stones have been arranged and rearranged, what the various vicars and worshippers have said and done over the ages, and so on, we know all there is to know about whether the same church has persisted

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[1] 'Survival for inanimate things is a matter of degree.  As we gradually replace bits of the desk with new bits, the resulting desk is only more or less the same as the original desk' (Swinburne 1984: 17); see also Parfit 1984: 213.

throughout.  There is no further fact to be learned.  If there <u>were</u> such a fact, we could never discover it.  But it is hard to believe that anything is hidden here.  There are no doubt great mysteries that will always remain opaque to us, but whether we have the same church after replacing half the stones and the vicar is surely not one of them.  Call this the <u>no-answer thesis</u>.[2]

A third claim is that questions of identity over time can have more than one right answer.  We can say that today's church is the original church, and we can say that it isn't, but rather a newer church built on the same site.  Despite appearances, both claims are equally correct, and describe the situation in different but compatible ways.  Arguing about whether it's the same church or a different one is like arguing about whether the number of cows in the field is six or half a dozen.  Call this the <u>many-answers thesis</u>.[3]

Then there is the thought that questions about identity over time are, as Reid put it, 'very often questions about words'.  They are verbal or semantic questions in the pejorative sense of the term.  They are not about what is the case, but merely about how best to describe it.  Suppose we agree about the distribution of hair on Florian's head (and on other heads, if that is relevant) but disagree about whether he is bald.  It is hard to believe that this is a substantive dispute.  We are merely quarrelling about a word: about whether the state of Florian's head warrants the use of the term 'bald'.  Likewise, if we know all the underlying facts about the arrangement of stones and the behaviour of worshippers over the centuries, to ask whether the same church has persisted throughout is not to ask about any further fact, but only to ask whether the underlying facts warrant the description 'same church'.  Call this the <u>verbal-question thesis</u> (see e.g. Parfit 1995: 25).

Finally there is the idea that matters of identity over time are sometimes matters not for discovery but for decision.  If we decide that today's club or bicycle or church is the same as yesterday's, then it is; if we decide that it isn't, it's not.  Or at least this is so in cases where the other facts leave the question open: where nature draws no boundaries, we are free to draw them ourselves.  (Who 'we' are and what we have to do to decide such matters are up for grabs.)  Call this the <u>decision thesis</u>.[4]

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[2] Swinburne again: 'Are the two armies the same?  Our criteria of "same army" give no definite answer--you can say that the armies are the same or you can say that they are different.  There is no right answer.' (1974: 235) Parfit says that such questions have no answer and are therefore 'empty' (1984: 213).

[3] According to Parfit, claims like this 'do not describe different possibilities, any of which might be true.  These claims are merely different descriptions of the same outcome.' (1984: 259)

[4] Wiggins says that the identity of artefacts (but not that of organisms or people) 'may be a matter of convention, or even caprice' (1976: 163).

No friend of imperfect identity is likely to accept all five of these claims. If nothing else, the no-answer thesis looks incompatible with the many-answers thesis: a question can no more have both no answer and many answers, it seems, than someone can have both no children and many children. Still, those who hold one of the claims tend to hold most of the others as well. And they usually take the same questions of identity over time to be imperfect in each of these ways: it isn't that some are indeterminate and others are mere verbal questions, for instance; rather, the indeterminacy and the verbal status are supposed to be connected. The five claims are supposed to form a unified syndrome.

**3.**

What, then, are the supposed grave objections to the imperfect-identity thesis?

Start with the indeterminacy thesis. For one thing, it appears to conflict with most of the other claims. Those who say that some questions of identity over time have no answer, or many answers, typically say that this is so in just those cases where identity is indeterminate. But if it is indeterminate whether certain things are identical, doesn't that answer the question of their identity? Suppose today's village church is neither definitely the same as the ancient church nor definitely not the same. Then the question of whether it is the same church <u>has</u> an answer, namely that it neither definitely is nor definitely isn't: the present church and the ancient one are borderline-identical. Not only does that answer the question, but it is the <u>only</u> right answer. Any other answer will be at most partly right: if we say that it is the same church, or that it isn't, what we say will have at best a truth value intermediate between truth and falsity. Compare: if Florian is a borderline case of baldness, then the one true answer to the question of whether he is bald is that he is borderline-bald. And if a question has a unique answer, it can hardly have no answer, or many answers.

Perhaps those who say that questions of identity over time have no answer mean only that they have no <u>definite</u> answer. But what is a definite answer? Not an answer that is definitely true, for according to the indeterminacy thesis the claim that today's church is borderline-identical with the ancient church may well be definitely true. Maybe the no-answer thesis means nothing more than that the answer to certain questions about identity over time is neither definitely yes nor definitely no. That would make it a mere restatement of the indeterminacy thesis. If that is what friends of the no-answer thesis are trying to say, they have expressed themselves badly.

The indeterminacy thesis also sits uneasily with the decision thesis. If today's

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According to Ayer, numerical identity can be 'a matter for decision and not a question of fact' (1964: 127). See also Nozick 1981: 34. For criticism of the decision thesis see Olson 1997 and Merricks 2001.

church and yesterday's church are borderline-identical, and if this is so independent of our decisions about the matter, then how can it be up to us to decide whether they are identical? If they are borderline-identical and we declare them to be identical we shall be at most half right, and no amount of deciding will alter that fact. On the other hand, if we decide that the churches are the same and our deciding really does make it so, how can they be neither definitely the same nor definitely not the same?

**4.**

Now consider the indeterminacy thesis apart from its relation to the other claims. It seems to say that identity itself can be indeterminate or vague: that there are pairs of objects (if we can call them pairs) that are neither definitely one thing nor definitely two. Today's church and the church that stood here 600 years ago might relate to one another in a way that lies between their being one thing and their being two things.

This is a notoriously contentious claim. Indeed, the dominant view is that it is incoherent. There doesn't seem to be room for a status that lies between being one thing and being two things in the way that there is a status that lies between being bald and being non-bald. The usual argument for this is easily summarized (Evans 1978, Salmon 1981: 243-45). Suppose it is indefinite whether x is y. Then x has the property of being indefinitely identical with y. But y does not have the property of being indefinitely identical with y. Thus, x has a property that y lacks, in which case x is not identical with y. And since the argument's premises are all definitely true (or would be if vague identity were possible), the conclusion is also definitely true: x and y are definitely not identical, contrary to the original supposition. In other words, things that were borderline identical would definitely differ in some way, making them definitely distinct; so things cannot be borderline identical.

This argument has been challenged (van Inwagen 1988, Lowe 1998: ch. 3). But it takes a good deal of ingenuity to come up with an account of vague identity that renders the argument unsound, and any such account is bound to be contentious in its own right.

The claim that identity can be indeterminate is controversial for another reason too: it contradicts the attractive view that the source of all vagueness lies in language (Lewis 1986: 212-3). The statement that Florian is bald, for instance, would seem to be neither definitely true nor definitely false simply because no one has bothered to give the predicate 'bald' a meaning precise enough to determine in exactly which possible cases it applies. The linguistic theory of vagueness says that all cases of indeterminacy owe to the fact that we haven't made our terms entirely precise. But this seems to imply that logical terms, such as unrestricted quantifiers and the identity sign, cannot be vague, for they are already as precise as they can be. There aren't a lot of precise relations that are

candidates for being the intension of the identity sign in the way that many precise properties are candidates for being the intension of the predicate 'bald'.

I don't want to defend the linguistic theory of vagueness or challenge the indeterminacy of identity. I want only to point out that the indeterminacy of identity is no harmless truism.

Perhaps those who find it obvious that statements of identity over time can be indeterminate don't mean to imply that identity itself is indeterminate. We will consider some of the things they might mean in sections 6 and 7. But those things are no less controversial than the vagueness of identity.

**5.**

Turn now to the decision thesis: the idea that it is somehow up to us to decide, at least in some cases, whether a thing existing at one time is identical with a thing existing at another time. If anything, this looks even more mysterious than the indeterminacy thesis. It is hard to see how our decisions, by themselves, could create facts about which things are identical and which are distinct. That sounds like magic. We can, of course, create identity facts in more mundane ways. We might be able to bring it about that today's church is identical with the church that stood here centuries ago by gathering up all the original stones and laying them just as they were laid then. We can certainly bring it about that today's church is <u>not</u> the ancient one by knocking down the stone church and putting up a new one made of plywood. We can create identity facts by rolling up our sleeves and moving things about. But we can't do it simply by making a decision, or by thinking and speaking in a certain way. Not only can you and I not do this, but neither can Parliament, or the courts, or even the Queen. We can imagine the Queen saying, 'We hereby declare the church before us now to be the church first built on this site.' But the stones will not listen. The Queen's word has no more power over the identity of things than it has over the weather.

If you are not convinced, consider this (Chisholm 1976: 111). Suppose you are worried about a surgical operation that you have to undergo without anaesthetic. Now imagine that the Queen offers to declare officially that when the operation takes place, the one who suffers the pain will not be you, but someone else--perhaps someone newly created who takes your place temporarily and insensibly; perhaps someone who already exists and insensibly swaps places with you. If the Queen's word is effective, your attitude towards the operation ought to be no different from your attitude towards anyone else's painful operation. Would her offer set your mind at ease? I don't think so.

(You might suggest that the very existence of certain things somehow consists, at least in part, in our decisions. Not that our decisions cause them to exist; rather, the

relation between our decisions and their existence is logical. Call such things 'conventional constructs': political and social entities might be examples. Whether such things survive or perish might then be a matter for decision rather than discovery. I lack the space to explore this dark thought here. But I doubt whether many philosophers think that only conventional constructs have imperfect identity. In any case, this claim is at least as contentious as those discussed in the next two sections.)

It is hard to see how the decision thesis could be true if it means what it seems to mean, namely that facts about identity are answerable to our decisions. I suspect that advocates of the decision thesis mean something else. I think they mean that certain <u>linguistic</u> facts, about how it is right to describe the facts of identity, are up to us. If this is not what they mean, then I don't understand them.

What linguistic facts? Well, suppose the many-answers thesis is true: somehow there are many different and seemingly conflicting answers to certain questions about identity over time. Even though these answers may all be true, not all will be appropriate in all contexts; and which ones are appropriate may be up to us. Here is a partial analogy: Suppose you point to an object on my desk and ask, 'What is that?' I might reply that it is a material object, or an object of scientific interest, or something smaller than a breadbasket, or something other than Winston Churchill. All of these answers would be true. But none would be appropriate: they don't tell you what you want to know. An appropriate answer would be something like 'It's a fossil I picked up last summer'. What makes this answer appropriate and the others not has to do with our interests, and is at least to some degree up to us. Perhaps what makes an answer to a question about identity over time appropriate--though not whether it is true--is up to us to decide in a similar way.

So far so good, perhaps. But this only makes vivid how strange the many-answers thesis is. Suppose I say that today's church is the one that stood here centuries ago and you say it isn't. The many-answers thesis says that these claims might both be true. Yet you appear to be asserting the negation of what I am saying. If I'm right, it is the same church; if you're right, it isn't. If we're both right, it is <u>and</u> it isn't. The many-answers thesis appears to entail a straightforward contradiction. And most friends of imperfect identity are probably old-fashioned enough to believe that contradictions can never be true.

How can my claim that this thing and that one are identical be consistent with your claim that they are not identical? Only if there is some sort of ambiguity. In that case it ought to be possible to disambiguate the claims and restate them in a more perspicuous way that makes the appearance of conflict go away.

There are two obvious possibilities here. One is that we mean different things by the

words 'are identical': I might be saying that the objects are 'identical' in one sense of the word, while you deny that they are 'identical' in another sense. The other possibility is that we are talking about different objects: I might mean one object by the words 'today's church' while you mean another. We will take up these suggestions in the next two sections.

**6.**

The indeterminacy thesis looks incompatible with the no answer-thesis, the many-answers thesis, and the decision thesis. It also appears to imply a notoriously contentious claim about the nature of identity, and to conflict with a popular view about vagueness. The decision thesis looks incredible, and the many-answers thesis appears to lead to a contradiction. I could make more complaints, but that will do. So here is a mystery: how could the imperfect-identity thesis be true? And here is another: how can so many able philosophers not only accept the thesis, but see it as a harmless truism? My objections to imperfect identity are hardly subtle or ingenious. They might have occurred to anyone. Why, then, has no one used them to attack the imperfect-identity thesis? Why have no friends of imperfect identity bothered to address them?

It is clear enough what Reid was thinking when he said that the identity of objects of sense was imperfect. He denied that anything could persist through any change of parts: necessarily, he thought, if x is a part of y at any time, then x is a part of y at every time when y exists. Call this the doctrine of mereological constancy. (It is a close cousin of the stronger doctrine of mereological essentialism, that objects have their parts essentially.) It implies that nearly all statements asserting the identity over time of ordinary physical objects are false, for physical objects are constantly shedding atoms: no ordinary thing continues to be composed of the same atoms for more than a moment. What happens to a material thing when it sheds an atom? It might cease to exist, and be instantly replaced by a very similar but numerically different object that lacks that atom as a part. Or it might continue to exist, composed of the same atoms as before. In that case it simply begins to disperse, changing from a connected object to a scattered one. Either way, what appears to be a persisting church or dog or bicycle is in reality a series of numerically different beings succeeding one another imperceptibly at a rate of trillions per second. No composite object persists and remains an ordinary thing for more than a moment. Our own identity is perfect, Reid thought, because we are not composite and have no parts to lose.[5]

What has this got to do with imperfect identity? Well, even if mereological constancy is true and ordinary things don't persist in the way we think they do, it may

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[5] Butler (1736) and Chisholm (1976: ch. 3) held the same combination of views. I discuss mereological constancy at greater length in Olson 2006.

still be useful to speak as if they did: to 'feign a continu'd object', as Hume put it. For ordinary purposes it is better to say, 'That church has stood there for centuries', than to say, 'That church is brand new'. We haven't got enough names to give a different one to every church that has stood on the site during the last second, let alone over many centuries. So we pretend that they are the same: when we speak of churches, we use the language of identity over time in what Butler called a 'loose and popular sense', rather than in the 'strict philosophical sense' of genuine numerical identity. This loose and popular sense is what Reid meant by imperfect identity--though it is of course not really identity at all, but merely 'something which, for the conveniency of speech, we call identity'.

Now it is up to us to decide when to pretend that momentary objects existing at different times are identical. If a church's stones are all gradually replaced, we could decide to call the new church by the same name as the old one and say, 'the church has been repaired'. Or we could adopt a different criterion for feigning identity of churches and say in this case, 'the original church is no more; a new one stands in its place'. Of course, it is not up to us to decide whether any objects are numerically identical or distinct; but we're not talking about real identity here. We can see how someone might describe this by saying that questions of identity over time are often matters for decision rather than for discovery, misleading though that description would be.

What about the rest of the imperfect-identity thesis? Well, on Reid's story the question of whether the current church is the same as an earlier one may have several apparently conflicting but equally appropriate (or even true) answers in that different speakers might adopt different criteria for the imperfect identity of churches. Some of us might require most of the same matter to remain, while others tolerate any amount of material turnover as long as the form remains. We ourselves may use different criteria at different times or in different circumstances. This will lead us sometimes to describe a case by saying 'it is the same church' and other times to describe the same case by saying 'it is not the same church'. These statements will be compatible because the first will mean simply that the current church has the same form as the earlier one while the second means that they don't share most of the same matter--both of which could well be true. None of this implies that questions about identity over time strictly so called ever admit of more than one answer. This would make the many-answers thesis, or something like it, free from contradiction.

We could say that it is indeterminate whether a church has persisted if our criterion for the imperfect identity of churches is met to an intermediate degree. Suppose we call churches existing at different times 'the same' if they have the same form, or near enough (and if certain causal links also hold). How near is near enough? Since we're not

going to specify this precisely, there are bound to be borderline cases: cases where the later church's form is not definitely enough like the earlier church's, but not definitely not enough like it either. In such cases it will not be definitely appropriate to call it the same church, but also not definitely appropriate to call it a different church. And this will be so even if identity itself is always determinate: even if any objects are always either definitely one or definitely more than one.

If Reid is right, most questions of the form 'Is the thing that is $\underline{F}$ at $\underline{t}$ the thing that is $\underline{G}$ at $\underline{t}$*?' are about identity in the loose and popular sense and not about real identity. (If they were about real identity the answer would almost always be no.) And there is no great mystery about how such questions can sometimes be questions about words. Suppose you and I disagree about whether it's the same church or a new one even though we agree about all the underlying facts. Then we seem to be disagreeing only about whether the expression 'same' when applied to churches existing at different times means having the same form or having the same matter, or the like.

This is of course not a story about how questions of genuine numerical identity over time could be soft, but a story about the softness of a relation other than identity. But maybe the imperfect-identity thesis was never meant to be a claim about identity over time, despite appearances to the contrary. If so, then we have a solution to the first mystery: an account of how the imperfect-identity thesis, or something like it, could be true.

But we haven't yet solved the second mystery: why so many philosophers find the imperfect-identity thesis innocuous. The principle of mereological constancy is out of fashion, and few friends of imperfect identity would accept it. And even if they did, they could hardly expect their readers to agree with them.


**7.**

Here is a more popular view that might underpin the imperfect-identity thesis. Consider again the village church that has been so much altered over the centuries that we don't know whether to say that there has been just one church there or a succession of different churches.

If the phrase 'today's church' referred uniquely to one object, it is hard to see how there could fail to be a unique answer to the question of whether that object existed in 1500. But maybe there is no such unique object. Perhaps many different objects with different histories are equally good candidates for being the referent of the phrase 'today's church'. There might be one that has existed since a church was first built on the site. There might be another that came into being in the course of extensive renovations in 1689. There might even be an object that has always been composed of

the very materials that make up the church now, the history of which (as a church, anyway) is still briefer. Call these objects C1, C2, and C3. They are presumably not set-theoretic constructions or the like, but concrete objects made of matter, capable of offering shelter from the elements. We may not want to call them all churches; or perhaps they are each churches in different senses of the word. In any case they are all church-like objects.

Suppose we then ask whether today's church stood here in 1500. Our suggestion is that this question is ambiguous, because 'today's church' doesn't refer uniquely. Because some of the things it might refer to stood here in 1500 and others didn't, our question has no straightforward answer (just as the question whether the planet between the earth and the sun is cloudy has no straightforward answer). We could describe this lack of a straightforward answer in several different ways. We could say that it is indeterminate whether today's church stood here in 1500 because C1 did and C2 and C3 didn't, and it is indeterminate which of them the phrase 'today's church' denotes. Or we could say that the question has no answer because it is based on the false presupposition that 'today's church' refers uniquely. Or we could say that insofar as the sentence 'Did today's church stand here in 1500?' ambiguously expresses several different questions, each about a different object, it has as many different answers as those questions have. In that case, those who disagree about when the church came into being may be disagreeing only about words: about which thing the words 'today's church' refer to. We could even say that the answer to the question is up to us to decide, insofar as it is up to us which object--C1, C2, or C3--we use the phrase 'today's church' to denote.

Call this story the <u>multiple-referents view</u>. It would seem to justify the idea that questions about the identity over time of such things as churches--or at least questions phrased in the language of identity over time--are soft. And it would answer the objections that the imperfect-identity thesis would otherwise face. It doesn't require identity itself to be indeterminate. It doesn't imply that questions about the identity of any particular object lack answers, but only that questions may lack answers because there is no one object that they are definitely about. For the same reason it doesn't imply that questions about the identity of any particular object ever have more than one right answer. Nor does it imply that whether any particular object is identical with something existing at another time is ever up to us to decide.

Like the principle of mereological constancy, the multiple-referents view provides an account of how the imperfect-identity thesis, or something like it, could be true. Might today's friends of imperfect identity be presupposing it? They don't <u>say</u> that they are. Of course, some presuppositions don't bear stating. It would be tiresome for me to tell people of my belief that 5 is prime, and more tiresome still to give arguments for it. No

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one disagrees. But the multiple-referents view is not that sort of claim.

Think about how many concrete objects it requires there to be. Consider a case where we want to say that an object gradually goes out of existence: a dog, Gerald, whose organs shut down one by one over a period of several hours, say. At noon Gerald definitely still exists; at six he definitely no longer exists; in between it is unclear. This looks like a case where identity over time is imperfect if it ever is. Imagine people debating about when in the course of his decline Gerald makes his exit: some say at two, some say half past three, some say five to six. Anyone with any sympathy for the imperfect-identity thesis will want to say that this dispute is pointless--not because we can't know exactly when the creature perished, but because there is no such precise time. Each answer is as good as the others. None of them is wrong. More generally, any time between noon and six is an acceptable answer to the question of when the animal comes to an end.

According to the multiple-referents view, this is possible because there is a being--a referent, or candidate-referent, of the name 'Gerald'--that ceases to be at each of these times. One perishes at two, another at half past three, and a third at five to six. But of course there are infinitely many such times, and none is supposed to be definitely a wrong answer to the question of when Gerald perishes. So the multiple-referents view requires there to be an infinite number of dying dogs, or beings very like dogs, that are candidates for the reference of the name 'Gerald'. These beings differ from one another only in the time of their demise. Presumably there are dog-like objects going out of existence at every moment before he began to die as well. (Surely these objects don't begin appearing, like vultures, only as death approaches.) For every moment during Gerald's career, there is a dog-like object coinciding with him that ceases to exist then. And this will be true not just for dogs, but for all objects whose identity over time can be imperfect. Wherever we would say that there is just one concrete object, there are really an infinity of superimposed objects differing only in the length of their careers.

This picture sounds very like 'four-dimensionalism', the view that for an object to exist at different times is for it to have different temporal parts that exist at those times and only then. What could the many referents of the name 'Gerald' be if not temporal parts of dogs? (There may be non-four-dimensionalist versions of the multiple-referents view, but they are likely to be troublesome.)

Now four-dimensionalism is a fashionable view (at least in some parts), and there is much to be said in its favour. But it also has many articulate opponents. It is a claim on a par with act utilitarianism in ethics or instrumentalism in the philosophy of science. It is hardly the sort of assumption one can expect readers to share.

**8.**

There may be views other than mereological constancy and four-dimensionalism that would make the imperfect-identity thesis intelligible. (The view that identity is never 'absolute' but is always relative to something would be an example: see Olson 1997 for details.) But these other views are likely to be at least as contentious as those we have discussed.

I conclude that the friends of imperfect identity--insofar as they are talking sense, anyway--are not talking about strict numerical identity at all, but about some other relation. What is more, they are presupposing mereological constancy, or four-dimensionalism, or some other metaphysical view of equal moment. (Or if they are not presupposing any of these views in particular, they are assuming that some one of them, they know not which, is true.) In any case, they are not entitled to assert the imperfect-identity thesis as if it were obvious.

Not, anyway, unless its denial presupposes something far worse. Is there an attractive alternative to imperfect identity?

There at least appears to be. Suppose it is possible for a thing to have different parts at different times: mereological constancy is false. Better, suppose that ordinary objects can have the sorts of careers we take them to have. And suppose that persisting things are not made up of arbitrary temporal parts: four-dimensionalism is false. Suppose that when we point to a church or a dog or a human being we are not pointing to a vast number of ecclesiastical or canine or human objects with different pasts and different futures, but to only one thing. This is of course nothing more than the barest outline of a view. I don't say that it is unproblematic, or even true. But it doesn't seem crazy. Many philosophers accept it. It <u>looks</u> like a worthy alternative to mereological constancy and four-dimensionalism. Call it the <u>ordinary view</u>.

The ordinary view appears to be incompatible with the imperfect identity thesis (for the most part, anyway). When we ask whether a church or dog or human being existing now is identical with something existing at another time, the ordinary view suggests that we are asking about the identity or distinctness, in the strict philosophical sense of the term, of a single object existing at one time and a single object existing at another. And it seems that that question must have a unique answer: yes or no. Or if identity can be vague, the answer might be that it is indeterminate; but then that would be the one right answer. The question is in no way merely verbal. It has an answer that we can be wrong about or ignorant of, even if we know all the underlying facts. It is no more up to us to decide than it is up to us to decide whether grass is green. On the ordinary view, questions about identity over time appear to be just as solid as any other.

Those who assume that identity over time is soft are assuming by implication that the

ordinary view is false. That, surely, is unwarranted. Some version of the imperfect-identity thesis might be true; and then again it might not be. Which it is depends on the answer to hard metaphysical questions.[6]

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