

## Pelican Program: Philosophy Task

**Please read the following extract and notes (on the next page).**

From Burke, M. (1994) "Dion and Theon: An Essentialist Solution to an Ancient Puzzle", in *The Journal of Philosophy*.

The Stoic philosopher Chrysippus (c. 280 B.C.-c. 206 B.C.) is said to have posed the following puzzle. Yesterday, there was a whole-bodied man called 'Dion' who had a proper part called 'Theon'. Theon was that part of Dion which consisted of all of Dion except his left foot. Today, Dion's left foot was successfully amputated. So, if Dion and Theon both still exist, they are numerically different objects now occupying just the same place and wholly composed of just the same matter. Presuming this to be impossible, the question is which of the two, Dion or Theon, has ceased to exist.' At first thought, of course, it seems that neither has ceased to exist. It would seem absurd to deny that Dion is still with us. Surely, a man can retain his identity despite the loss of a foot. But it also seems undeniable that Theon still exists. Theon, it seems, has emerged from the surgery intact. Might it be that Dion and Theon, who initially were two, have both survived, but now are one? Assuming the indiscernibility of identicals, a principle invoked even in Hellenistic philosophy, the answer is "no." For even now there is something true of Dion which is not true of Theon: that he once had two feet.

## Pelican Program Philosophy Task

Please carefully read the following notes and write a response of no more than 300 words.

**You are advised to begin your response by clearly explaining what you understand the problem to be. You could then think about each of the assumptions (1-5 stated below) and discuss whether or not you agree with these assumptions and why. If you have a particular reaction to any of the assumptions then include this in your response.**

The extract you just read sets out a classical philosophical problem about the identity of objects. What does it take for an object to persist through time? What makes you, today, the same person that you were yesterday?

The puzzle works with numerous assumptions about how to tackle this problem. Often, when people think about identity, they assume that there has to be some psychological connection between you today and you yesterday (perhaps you have to remember what you did yesterday, or you have to have a similar personality). Notice that this puzzle isn't concerned with psychological connections like this.

Here, the problem is phrased in terms of *parthood*. It's possible to talk about the parts of a person as though they were objects. I can think about my brain or my leg and treat those things as objects. Consider the part picked out by *all of my body minus my left foot*. We could call this part Will-minus (as in, Will minus his left foot).

But what happens if I lose my left foot? Before I lost my left foot, there were two objects: Will and Will-minus. We could distinguish Will and Will-minus because they were made up of different things. Will was made up of Will-minus *plus* a left foot. Whereas Will-minus was made up of Will *without* a left foot. After I lost my left foot, Will and Will-minus share the exact same matter. Will-minus has plausibly not been changed (Will-minus never had a foot). Will, however, has lost his foot.

The problem is that we now have several very strange options to pick from. We could say any of the following:

- Will exists but Will-minus has ceased to exist: but we didn't do anything to Will-minus. We removed the leg of Will, which wasn't part of Will-minus
- Will-minus exists but Will has ceased to exist: but it seems strange to say that Will couldn't survive the loss of his leg – that doesn't accord well with our intuitions either!
- Perhaps Will-minus *never* existed and it's wrong to talk about objects having proper parts: but that's also deeply counterintuitive. We normally talk about parts of objects as though they were also objects. Moreover, being a part of something is *relative*. So does this mean that whether something is an object depends on how it's embedded in the world? Would Will stop existing if it was part of a larger object?

- Perhaps both Will and Will-minus exist, and are distinct: but how can two objects be made up of the same matter in the same place at the same time and yet still not be identical?
- Finally, perhaps both Will and Will-minus exist, but are identical: this is even stranger. If two objects are identical, then nothing should be true of one that isn't true of the other. But Will has a property that Will-minus lacks; Will *used* to have a left foot, whereas Will-minus never had a left foot. More generally, if A and B are identical, how can A have a property that B lacks (and vice versa)?

From a simple puzzle, we now have five very odd options.

Notice that there are a lot of things we'd like to say about this situation which aren't compatible:

1. Will survives losing his foot.
2. Will-minus survives Will losing his foot.
3. Parts exist.
4. Two things can't be distinct and yet be made of exactly the same matter (in the same place at the same time).
5. Things that are identical don't have different properties.

So, this is a classic philosophical puzzle. We have all these assumptions that we intuitively think are right, but they can't all be right. The philosopher's job is to figure out how to respond to this situation.

Here, you could think about six apparent solutions to this puzzle

- 1 – 5: reject one of the assumptions above.
- 6: try to show that the assumptions were never really in tension.

How you approach these depends on what kind of philosopher you are.

You might think that all five assumptions are really important and true, so you'll try to show that they are not in tension. However, you might fail to do this – i.e., the problem is serious. In that case, you'll want to reject the assumption that causes the least damage to your view. This will involve some thinking.

Which of these assumptions can we live without? Which assumption causes the least problems? There may be no clear answer. But a good philosophical response will make the case that one of these assumptions can be rejected with greater ease than the others. To do this, you might set out examples or present a new argument. Crucially, you're trying to minimise the damage that rejecting an assumption may have.

On the other hand, you might think that these assumptions aren't worth hanging on to. Perhaps you think that objects *can* be identical despite having different properties. This might cause you to reject the assumption and care less about the damage it does. This would be a more revolutionary attitude to take, and it would probably involve explaining why our intuitions go so wrong.

You also might not think that this is a problem worth being concerned about, because the assumptions are in some sense *silly*; for instance, you might think that the idea of an *object* is ill-defined and that philosophers should care less about such esoteric terms. In that case, you'd need to set out how and why you think that the term *object* is dubious and what you think we are left with once we've abandoned it. Someone might hit back and say that the term *object* does a lot of useful work in philosophy, and you might want to respond to such a challenge by showing that the work in question can be done without the term.