Bernard Williams – “The Self and the Future”

***Personal Identity*** *–* what makes you the same person over time?

Two basic theories of personal identity:

1. Bodily continuity theory
2. Mental continuity theory

Williams presents two thought experiments which push us toward opposite conclusions about personal identity.

1. The body switching thought experiment
   1. Two people, A and B, are going to have their minds transferred between each other’s bodies.
   2. One of the resultant bodies is going to get tortured, the other will get $100,000.
   3. Before the experiment, we ask A and B what they want
   4. After the experiment, we ask them if they got what they wanted
   5. Outcome: after the experiment, it looks like A is in B’s body, and B is in A’s body
   6. **Conclusion**: personal identity is determined by mental continuity
2. The torture thought experiment. Before A gets tortured tomorrow…
   1. A is subjected to an operation which produces total amnesia
   2. Amnesia is produced in A, and other interference leads to changes in his character
   3. Same as in (ii), and at the same time illusory “memories” are implanted in his brain. These memories are totally fictitious and don’t match anyone’s real memories.
   4. Same as in (iii), but both the character and “memory” impressions are designed to be appropriate to another actual person, B
   5. Same as in (iv), except that the result is produced by putting the information into A from the brain of B, by a method which leaves B the same as he was before
   6. Same as in (v), but B is not left the same, since a similar operation is conducted in the reverse direction
   7. **Conclusion**: personal identity is determined by bodily continuity

The catch: (1) and (2) are basically the same thought experiment, just described differently.

* So which is the right description of it?
* Unsatisfying answers:
  + It’s conceptually undecidable who is who
  + It’s purely a matter of convention whom we call A and whom we call B
* Why (2) *might* be the right description:
  + The experiment described in (1) has to be set up *just right*. Any small tweak would no longer produce a situation where we’d say that two people switched bodies.