

# On Personal Identity

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## **Abstract**

How do I know who I am? I will examine the basic issues surrounding personal identity, using the articles by Shoemaker, Parfit and Swinburne as a basis for this essay. Why does personal identity arise as a metaphysical issue in the first place? Can a materialist account satisfy odd cases such as multiple personality?

## **1 Introduction**

Issues of personal identity are important in the field of metaphysics mainly because philosophers are unwilling to accept Modernity's answers of chemical reactions in the brain. Sydney Shoemaker observes that the existence of intentional states, and qualitative states of the mind, makes it difficult to see how any of this could be reducible to "simple" neuro-psychology. The questions coming to mind surrounding personal identity consist of those such as: what is it about personal identity that allows departures from the normal course of events? There have been many books in fiction and fact, written regarding the subject of memory loss, or memory transplantation, or implantation. Although it is something that does not occur often in nature, such events intrigue humans due to the value placed on one's self identity.

Shoemaker notes that if a wizard were able to reduce any object into a pile of sand, and then recreate that *identical* object, most of us would not be too averse to having this wizard attempt the trick on our kitchen stove.

However, if the wizard would ask to attempt the trick on us, or a beloved, “only a madman” would agree to such a thing. Shoemaker explains this as directly linked to the special concern each of us has regarding his own future welfare.

Derek Parfit also pointed towards the concern each of us has regarding his future welfare. He considered the case of split-brain patients and the fictional teleporter. Humans have objections to such things as cloning, and replication (as in the teleporter) because the replica which will be created would mean that there is a death of ourselves *here*, while our replica, on Mars let’s say, will continue where we left off. This bothers us tremendously because Parfit argues, we see our consciousness as having an existence apart from our body, which is not true.

## 2 Contiguity of Consciousness

To clarify personal identity, Shoemaker denoted three distinct issues that we must consider.[2, p. 298]

1. Make intelligible the knowledge we have of personal identity, especially through the use of personal memory.
2. Make intelligible the special sort of relationship we have regarding personal identity.
3. Account of personal identity ought to cohere with what we know of the rest of the world

Shoemaker first notes that the concept of identity is consistent with temporal change. According to some objections to the Leibnitz identity theory, if a leaf is green in the summer and brown in the fall, it is not the same leaf. This, Shoemaker argues, is an inconsistent application of the identity theory. What the theory says is if  $a$  is the same as  $b$  and  $a$  at time  $t$  has property  $x$ , then  $b$  at time  $t$  will also have property  $x$ . While  $a$  at time  $t+1$  will have property  $y$ , and  $b$  at time  $t+1$  will have property  $y$ . In other words, if the leaf is green in the summer, and the leaf is the same leaf as the one in the fall, then the autumn leaf in the summer, will also be green and vice-versa.

Shoemaker expands this by making use of the concept of *unity relations*. Thus, through the use of the table analogy, while people might be sitting at the same table as the day before, there are differences, at least temporally.

What we must examine are the relations between yesterday's table and today's table; this relation that holds true for both days, are what constitute the identity of the person sitting at the table.

Turning his attention to change of composition, Shoemaker argues that identity can persist through the change of internal substance because an item is *not* the same as the sum of its components. When we consider the object called "tree", we do not think of its substance and hence do not conflate the two separate items.

## 2.1 Locke's Memory Theory

Shoemaker argues for Locke's theory of the continuity of consciousness as a qualification for personal identity. Memory of the self - judgements made about the self in the past - cannot be mistaken, to the degree that one *can* remember past true events, or experiences. Locke's theory of sameness of consciousness relied heavily on the use of memory to connect one's identity through time. Shoemaker arrives at a concept he calls "remembering from the inside".[2, p. 301] This concept consists of the following: if one remembers  $x$  then  $x$  is part of one's experience (or action), implying a personal connection with one's memory. Further, this theory implies that personal identity is independent of bodily identity.

If Smith's brain gets transplanted into Jones' body, then it may be said that Jones is not the same person he was before. However, Smith's brain brings along with it all of the "inside" information about Smith's "previous" life. One would tend to agree that because Smith can remember so much personal and inside information about Smith's old body, that his consciousness indeed resides in Jones' body.

Arguments against the memory theory reside in discontinuities over time slices. If someone is 20 years old, and can remember what happened to him at ten years old, and the same person at 40 can remember his 20's, but not events which occurred when he was ten, then the memory theory fails. In this case, the person at 40 is not the same person he was at ten years old. Shoemaker argues that this failure to reconcile the differences comes from the word play of able to remember, versus actually remembering. Under hypnosis, the person at forty will remember events of his early childhood. Locke states that the person is able to remember, if he wanted to, the memories he has forgotten. Consider the many times you have attempted to remember where you have placed a particular item. Sometimes you completely cannot

remember where you have placed your item. However, its location would be revealed easily when you sit down, and think about the course of events leading up to the last time you “remember” having your item. Then instantly, an image of the item’s placement (and location) comes to your mind. In this previous case, you were *physically able* to remember the location of the item; whether or not you *do indeed* remember is another matter altogether different.

### 3 Bundle Theory

Parfit argues for the Bundle Theory, which states that we cannot explain the unit of consciousness through *people* but rather as a series of mental states and events. Each one of these series constitutes a life, denying the existence of a person to be existing separately from one’s body.

Parfit brings into existence science fiction’s favourite toy: the teleporter. It is a device which can read the configuration of your matter while destroying it, then transfer the information to another location (at the speed of light). The receiver reads this information creating an exact copy of your matter there. For all intensive purposes, argues Parfit, *you* will die. However, you will have a replica of yourself who will pick up where you left off with life. *The replica will not be you*, rather, it will be someone who will be exactly similar to you.[1, p. 313]

The question that Parfit raises is whether or not the person would be the same person as you are. He insists that the answer is *no*. Although the replica would be psychologically contiguous upto the point you completely dematerialised, it would not have a “normal” cause. The wrong line of reasoning, he states is to believe that the teleporter will not get “you” to Mars. You want the person on Mars to be “you” in a specially intimate way in which no one else could ever be. This line of reasoning, he argues, is fallacious because it falls under the *Ego Theory*.

The Ego Theory states that the person’s continued existence is explained through the persistence of a particular subject of experiences. In other words, personal identity obtains when the individual, as subject to experiences, persists through time. To ground the argument on actual data, Parfit introduces split-brain patients. Split-brain patients are those whose brains lack the dominant hemisphere leaving the sub-dominant halves. As a result, if you present a blue placard visible to one side, and a red placard visible to the other, then

when you ask the individuals to write down what colour they see, the left hand will write blue, and the right hand will write red.

The Ego Theorists would argue that split-brain patients have two separate streams of consciousness, and that there are not two persons. What unifies the experiences in one person's stream is the fact that the blue experience and writing of blue is being had by one subject, the opposite being true of the other stream. The Ego Theorists separate the person from the subject of experiences; as such, they violate Ockham's razor: the introduction of the subject of appearances that are not persons.

The Bundle Theorists would argue, however, that very much like persons having several different experiences at once, one may have several states of awareness of several different experiences. This does not introduce any sort of third entity like the ego which are not the same as the person (patient) in the split-brain analogy.

## 4 Dualist Theory

Richard Swinburne, however, disagrees with Parfit's theory. He states that a fundamental difficulty of the theory is that it commits Parfit to factual claims which could very well be false. Swinburne argues for the classical dualist theory, such that persons are comprised of both their bodies *and* their immaterial stuff<sup>1</sup>

Swinburne allows for two additional types of existence for a person: the reincarnated, and disembodied self. We all have a body to explore the world around us, and affect the world around us. If all of the sudden you are moving some other body's arms and legs, and receiving sense perception from some other body's senses, then you can be said to have a reincarnated experience. Further, he proposes that it is possible also to "live" such that we effect change on the world through no body at all, and receive senses from the world without using our body's physical sense receivers; this case is called disembodied existence.

Against Locke, Swinburne also states that many of us *do* indeed forget large portions of our lives. As such, it is logically possible to have been reincarnated, or disembodied without any recollection of our prior selves. All that a person needs, in order to be a person, is a conscious experience, to be the subject of experiences. For any person who is conscious, there is not

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<sup>1</sup>Swinburne equates immaterial stuff, with souls.

logical impossibility that the person may continue to exist without is body. This allows for the logical possibility for continuity of the soul even after their bodies do not. Further that this fits in with a widened Aristotelian view of the body being an imperfect copy of the form of humans.

## 5 Final Thoughts

Although there have been a few arguments present to define the continuity of personal identity. In each of the cases, there seems to be a narrowing down to the definition of conscious entity or automaton. I would like to take the view of Bishop Butler and Thomas Reid: personal identity is undefinable and unanalysable. Further, that “no non-trivial account can be given of the identity conditions for persons”[2, p. 301] There is large pressure to take the leap of faith towards belief in either science’s traditional biochemical reactions (including neural networks) mixed with millions of years of evolution, or plain religious belief in the afterlife.

I will, however, state that like Descartes, I know I exists just by pure virtue of my thinking about my existence. There are intimate connections with historical parts of the effects of my intentional actions upon the world. For example, yesterday I purchased a blank mini-disc using my bank card; the resultant, trace records of my existence through the financial records of my bank account, and the accumulation of “stuff” in my home. The complex relations between the people I know, and myself, persist and are changed only through gradual changes. All of this, however, presupposes a person’s existence, namely mine; yet this is the very thing we are attempting to define. So this argument even fails to a certain degree by begging the question. Hence, I go back to Butler’s notion of a non-trivial account existing for the continuity of personal identity. For if we cannot even understand personal identity when involving one stream of consciousness, how are we to even tackle problems of multiple personalities.

## References

- [1] Parfit, Derek. “Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons”. Van Inwagen 310-7.

- [2] Shoemaker, Sydney. "Personal Identity: A Materialist Account" Van Inwagen 296-309.
- [3] Swinburne, Richard. "Personal Identity: The Dualist Theory" Van Inwagen 317-33.
- [4] Van Inwagen, Peter and Dean W. Zimmerman ed. *Metaphysics: The Big Questions*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. Pp. 261-265.