A Philosophical Identity Crisis

Chris Durante asks himself just what makes him the person he used to be.

Stepping into a park I had frequented as a little boy, memories of my childhood began to flood my mind, each one a rich story of a distant past. As I continued to reminisce, each story flowed into the next, and I began to witness the development of an intricate character whom I refer to as ‘me’. All these stories that I had authored in my experience flowed together to give me a unique history. Yet reflecting on all the experiences, goals, traits, and values that I’ve had, it dawned on me that my identity seemed more elusive than one might usually believe. Ruminating over these strands of my past, at times it was as if I could watch my traits develop, values evolve, my goals be accomplished and recreated; but other moments I recollected appeared in my mind as if they were foreign elements in my mental landscape. Some of the stories seemed to be integral aspects of who I am, while other memories seemed very distant, almost as if the main character was a different person.

Contemplating further, I began to wonder if there was more to my identity than common sense or intuition could account for. What struck me was the fact that I considered myself to be a single person with a single identity, yet viewing myself as always having been ‘me’ left something unresolved. The little boy, who shares my name and appears in my stories, seems to be so different from the person I am today, yet I tend to incorporate him into my identity as a single person. What is it exactly that makes me a single human person persisting through time with a single identity? Could it be my body – that I am and have been a single biological organism? Or, is it my mind – that my psychological states interconnect so that they constitute a single continuum? I also began to wonder, “At what point in my life did I begin to be a ‘person’? When did I attain ‘personhood’?” This got me thinking about a whole new series of questions: “Is that little boy truly the same person as I am today?”; “If I became severely demented, could I still be considered to be the same person as I was before?” Suddenly my pondering had led me to very serious metaphysical and philosophical problems. A dark storm of confusion and lightning-quick thoughts set in, only to give rise to a spectacular rainbow of insight in my psychic sky.

Distinct Identity Theories

We usually intuitively believe that our identities remain constant over long periods of time. We acknowledge changes in character traits, etc., yet maintain a belief in the singularity of people’s ‘actual’ identities. If your good friend Greg were to claim that he was not the same person he was five years ago, we would not usually assume that Greg was now a numerically distinct person, we would take it as a figure of speech denoting that Greg has undergone some major event in his life, or that he has undergone some drastic change in his personality traits. Yet when asked “Just what is it that makes a person persist as the same person over time?” can we really say what it is that gives human beings the unique personal identities we assume them to have?

Many philosophers have attempted to tackle the issue of personal identity, generating a number of distinct theories. I shall provide a synopsis of the two major accounts, mentioning some of the major players, and proceed to reconcile these opposing views with a hybrid account of what constitutes a personal identity which persists over time as a numerically identical individual, or in other words, what makes a single person.
The two major – and rival – accounts of personal identity in philosophy have been *physical* or body-based theories, and *psychological* theories of persistent identity. The dominant of the two are those theories which adhere to some form of psychology-based criterion of continuing personal identity. Yet before delving into this account I would like to summarize the physicalist approach.

**The Ship of Theseus: a famous paradox of physical continuity**

The *bodily continuity* criterion for personal identity states that for a person at a particular time (t1) and a person at a later time (t2) to be numerically identical (meaning, retaining a single identity which has persisted over time), the person at t1 (P1) and the person at t2 (P2) must possess the same body. If it can be said that the body in question is indeed the same body despite any changes in regard to its individual parts or particular material composition, then P2 is indeed the same person as P1.

This view focuses upon a body in its entirety: a single human body which may be said to be the same physical thing as a previous body regardless of differences in some descriptive characteristics. Hence, if we follow the existence of the physical body which received the name ‘Greg’ at birth to the same grown body called ‘Greg’ at age twenty-five, then despite many differing physical traits, it may be said that this is indeed the same individual to whom the name ‘Greg’ was given in infancy. Therefore, on this theory, what matters for continuing personal identity is the continuing existence of a single physical entity. (More complex and elaborate versions of this theory have been put forth by David Wiggins and Eric Olsen.)

By contrast, *psychological* theories assert that the criterion for the persistence of personal identity over time is the intertwined relations of an individual’s psychological states. Initially, this theory was postulated by John Locke (1632-1704), often deemed the father of the personal identity problem. He employed memory as the sole criterion for identity. Later the theory was revised, by Lockeans and others, to include a plethora of psychological factors, not solely memories, as means of accounting for one’s singular personal identity over time. These more sophisticated theories focus primarily on either *psychological continuity* or *psychological connectedness*, or on a fusion of the two, and often rely on the idea of ‘person-stages’ (a person at t1 is a person-stage, at t2 is another person-stage, etc).

The psychological continuity theory typically states that in order for P1 at t1 to be identical to P2 at t2, some continuity of memory and personality must be recognizable between P1 and P2. The psychological connectedness theory, closely related to the psychological continuity theory, maintains that some type of psychological connectedness is necessary between person-stages for the two to have a single identity over time; but unlike memory-based theories of identity, the entirety of the contents of psychological states may be analysed and utilised to ascribe identity. To borrow a concise summary of Harold Noonan’s from his book *Personal Identity* (1989):

“One such connection is that which holds between an intention and the later act in which this intention is carried out. Other such direct psychological connections are those which hold when a belief, desire, or any other psychological feature, persists... In general any causal links between past factors and present psychological traits [not merely memories] can be subsumed under the notion of psychological connectedness.” (pp.10-11).
A classic refutation of Locke’s simple memory criterion for personal identity has been made by Thomas Reid (1710-96). His ‘Paradox of the Brave Officer’ essentially goes as follows. Consider a child who grows into a young man, and then into an old man. Based on a simple memory criterion alone, one could assert that the child is psychologically connected to the young man if the young man has a good portion of the memories of the child; and the young man is psychologically connected to the old man insofar as the old man has sufficient memories of being the young man. However, the old man may nevertheless be said to be psychologically discontinuous with, that is, unconnected with, the child, due to the fact that the old man has no memories of being the child. Yet, how is it possible for the child to be the young man, and the young man to be the old man, but for the child to be a different person from the old man? "Obviously, these objections hit their target [the simple Lockean memory criterion], but they do not go deep” Noonan writes (p.55). That is, while powerful in its time, this objection fails to be an adequate objection to contemporary theories of psychological continuity, which say that as long as there is a continuous set of links of memories between the child and the old man, they may be said to be the same person. So (for example) as long as the old man can remember being the young man, and the young man can remember being the child, then the old man is the same person as the child.

One influential argument in favour of psychological rather than physical theories of identity has been put forward by Derek Parfit in Reasons and Persons (1984). It goes as follows. An individual enters a teleport machine on Earth, loses consciousness, and awakes in the teleport on Mars. The machine on Earth is the ‘scanner’ and the one on Mars is the ‘replicator’. Once the scanner has scanned the precise states of each molecule of the person’s body, it beams that information to the replicator on Mars and simultaneously completely destroys the body on Earth. Out of entirely new matter, the replicator on Mars creates a body which is an exact replica of the previous one. The person then steps out of the replicator with no thought that he is not continuous with the person on Earth, and thus he may be considered the same person. So this person has psychological but not bodily continuity with the person on Earth.

Despite their dominance in philosophy, there are objections to psychological theories of personal identity. One such objection might be called ‘the duplication problem’. It is conceivable that one day there will exist a machine which will be able to record everything about one’s psychological states and transfer this information into a new body, or even into more than one body. This case is akin to a variation on Parfit’s teleportation thought experiment, in which the replicator malfunctions and produces a number of exact replicas of the body being transported. In either case, more than one individual will be in possession of precisely the same psychological states, all of which are continuous and connected with one previous person. According to this critique, the psychological criteria for identity must therefore fail, for we shall be left with two or more embodied people who according to the psychological criteria may rightfully be considered continuous with the same person. Intuitively, this seems rather absurd.

**Another Story of Identity**

While the defenders of the psychological criteria and the advocates of the bodily criteria continue to duel, concocting amusing and intriguing science-fiction-inspired thought-experiments, neither group has successfully managed to take down their opponent.
Each camp of theorists has attempted to capture something of what makes a human being a person retaining a single identity. However, neither position seems to capture another integral element of our lived existences, namely, that we tend to define ourselves through the telling of stories. We get to know one another by learning about each other’s life histories, and we relate to others, identifying with them, based on their values, ideologies, beliefs, personalities, etc, all of which are transmitted via narratives, verbal, written, or otherwise. Hence, an alternative response to the philosophical identity crisis has been the proposal that a human self gains its identity through narration. This is often referred to as Narrative Identity Theory.

All Narrative Identity Theorists maintain in some form or another that the identities of persons are self-created narratives – claiming that narration, or story-telling, is the mode in which we represent ourselves to ourselves, present ourselves to others, and represent others around us. The narrative theorist is attempting to capture that element of experience in which we say, “Hey, tell me your story,” or “I know you, I’ve heard stories about you.”

On this account, who one is (and is not) is contingent upon the stories of one’s past, and the stories of who one wishes to become; the goals one possesses and the actions taken to arrive at those ends; the values inherited narratively or arrived at through reflection and self-story-telling; and one’s emplotment as a character in the story of one’s life, interacting with the stories of others. The narrative theorist thus takes human linguistic abilities and goal-orientation to play a major role in someone’s acquisition of a unique identity as a person. Some theorists have maintained that the personal self is the product of an interactive unified narrative, others the virtual center of multiple narrative streams, while yet others maintain a more existential position, viewing the self as a constant becoming, evolving as we interact with our environments and reflect on our lives. Pre-eminent defenders of narrative identity include Daniel Dennett, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Paul Ricoeur. Although they differ in their approaches, they all attempt to capture features of the human condition which previous theorizing has ultimately left out, namely the importance of our life histories, story-telling, cultural immersion, goal-directedness, and self-creation.

Back To Life

While these theories of what make you continue to be you may seem obscure or abstract, they do indeed hold some bearing on human life and the concerns which arise on a daily basis – especially in medical settings, where we are faced with issues relating to brain death, permanent vegetative states, comas, advance directives and living wills, and many psychiatric dilemmas. All of these in one way or another evoke questions touching on the various theories presented.

Retiring from my sojourn in the park, having pondered the great mysteries of the human condition, I asked myself, “Could it not be that I am at once dependent upon my psychological connectedness, my biological persistence, and my life history, for my identity?” Although I did not accomplish a miraculous philosophical breakthrough during my stroll, I hope I have provided some food for thought with this précisé of positions on the ‘Philosophical Identity Crisis’.

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