

# A Dilemma for Personal Identity

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Some theories of personal identity allow persons to lose their identities in processes of qualitative change, i.e., to become a numerically different person by getting new physical and/or psychological properties. I shall call these theories *strong*. *Weak* theories, in contrast, do *not* allow for such a loss of identity. In general, weak theories put less restrictions on personal identity than strong ones. I will argue that each type of theory faces a serious problem.

Let me start with the strong theory which is built upon the notion of *psychological connectedness*. Suppose A is a person existing at a certain time, and B a person existing at a later time, then A and B are identical iff they are related by a sufficient number of direct psychological connections. According to Noonan (1989, 12-13) the following types of relations figure as direct psychological connections:

*Memory*: B remembers some of the experiences of A.

*Intention*: connections between an intention and the later act in which this intention is carried out.

*Persistence*: connections holding when a belief, or a desire, or any other psychological feature, persists.

*Causality*: any causal links between past factors and present psychological traits, including subconscious ones, such as links between childhood experiences and adult character traits, fears and prejudices.

Psychological connectedness, given by these four types of connections, is a strong criterion of personal identity. If the mind of A has changed so dramatically that B bears no specific similarity to A anymore, then psychological connectedness might have got lost. The person might have lost all memories, including the memories of past intentions. There might be no acts of B in which past intentions are carried out. No relevant belief, desire or other psychological feature might persist. And though there are probably causal links between A and the mind of B, other causal factors might have had much greater impact on B. Imagine that A's brain has been manipulated by a neuroscientist to implement new psychological features. In this case the main causal factor would arguably be the neurological manipulation itself, not the specific psychological properties of A before the manipulation.

A loss of identity can occur quite rapidly, but it can also take place as a gradual change over a relatively long period of time. David Lewis (1976, 65-67) gives the example of Methuselah who lived for 969 years (so the Bible says). Assume that at the age of 900 Methuselah has lost almost all mental properties he had at the age of 50. He has lost his memories and changed his character, turning from a happy and optimistic young guy to a grumpy, pessimistic old man. According to the theory of psychological connectedness, Methuselah at the age of 900 isn't identical to Methuselah at the age of 50 – provided that the psychological change has been large enough.

Perhaps you are still wondering, despite the previous example, whether there really is such a thing as a loss of identity. Actually, since we want to judge different theories as to whether they allow a person to become a

numerically different person, we must convince ourselves that such a transformation is possible independently of any particular theory of personal identity. In short, we must not accept the possibility of a personality transformation because our favourite theory of personal identity says it is possible. The argument goes the other way around: *first* we must accept the possibility of personality transformation, *then* a theory not allowing for that transformation can be claimed to be insufficient.

So can a person become another person? I personally am convinced by the example of Methuselah. If you are not, try to envisage more drastic changes. Imagine that not only the psychological, but also the *physical* properties of the person vary in a significant degree, which arguably happened in the case of Methuselah too. Or think again of neurological manipulation, or of serious forms of mental illness. Psychopathology provides at least *prima facie* reasons that a person can change identity, becoming a person who isn't the same as the one who existed before.

Strong theories, such as the theory of psychological connectedness, seem to be okay as far as loss of identity through qualitative change is concerned. It's possible to lose one's identity, and that's what strong theories imply. But nevertheless they suffer from a serious defect, for they don't correspond to how the notion of personal identity is commonly used. Among other things, it is used to describe the relation between *babies* and *adults*, especially when a person identifies with a baby who existed in the past. Suppose a person is watching a photo, saying "This is a picture of me when I was only one month old." Cases like this happen often enough, and they seem to be essential applications of our ordinary concept of personal identity.

Of course, there are possible worlds in which persons are *not* born as babies and don't grow up to become adults. Instead, adult people might come into existence, say, by some magical process. If you think that the concept of personal identity comprises, or should comprise, worlds like these too, then you are probably inclined to think that the identity of babies and adults isn't *essential* to personal identity. But even then your favourite theory should cope with the *possibility* of human development as we know it, and therefore with the identity of babies and adults. In fact, what we are looking for is a criterion of personal identity that fits the real world, not some possible world in which the concept of personal identity has changed too.

Unfortunately, the criterion of psychological connectedness does *not* fit with human development as we know it. If we are asking whether babies and adults are psychologically connected, the answer is likely to be no. Of the four types of connections mentioned before (taken from Noonan), the first three don't exist. I have no memories of my experiences as an one-month old baby, nor did I have an intention, at that age, which I am now carrying out. And finally, there's no persistence of a belief, or a desire, or any other psychological feature. Although the baby did have feelings of hunger, thirst and tiredness, which regularly affect me too, these feelings have not persisted during all those years.

While there's no memory, no intention, and no persistence, there are probably relations of type 4, causal connections. We expect to find causal links between the baby and the adult. Neurological processes in the baby's brain, e.g., are causally relevant to my present state of mind, if only in a remote way. This, however, suffices not to justify the claim that the baby and the adult are psychologically connected. In the absence of memory, intention and persistence, causality alone isn't enough to establish psychological connectedness.

We may conclude that according to the theory we are discussing at the moment, there's no identity of the baby and the adult. Hence it would be literally wrong if I said, "This is a picture of me when I was one month old". But this result is quite absurd. We must not sacrifice the identity of babies and adults, which is an important part of our common-sense theory of persons, and therefore of how we see ourselves. Better to sacrifice the underlying theory: the theory that personal identity is given by psychological connectedness. Though this theory is applicable to processes in which a person becomes another one by changing physical and psychological properties, it doesn't apply to the process in which a baby becomes an adult while staying the same person.

Turning to *weak* theories, however, we find them suffering from just the opposite problem. They are adequate for babies growing up to become adults, but not for Methuselah who becomes another person. As a paradigm case, let us consider *psychological continuity*, which is defined by psychological connectedness: B is psychologically continuous with A iff there's a chain of persons, beginning with A and ending with B, such that each link in that chain is psychologically connected to its predecessor.

Since I am psychologically continuous with the baby who was me, I am identical to the baby who was me. So here the theory yields the correct conclusion. But it fails to describe the transformation of Methuselah in the proper way. Given that his transformation doesn't occur in a moment but during a certain period of time, there arguably is a chain of psychologically connected persons linking Methuselah before the transformation with Methuselah after the transformation. Hence there's psychological continuity. The theory implies that Methuselah does *not* lose his identity.

It's easy to see that other weak theories give the same result. Think of the bodily criterion saying that A and B are identical iff they have the same body, where the diachronic identity of physical bodies is preferably defined by spatio-temporal trajectories: a body is identical to a body at a later time iff they are linked by a continuous trajectory. (To save the logic of identity, we would have to exclude fission and fusion, perhaps by something like the closest continuer criterion of Nozick 1981, 29-37.) According to the bodily criterion, the adult is identical to the baby, but Methuselah has again not turned into another person, because the identity of his body – defined by the body's trajectory – is conserved during the process, even when it undergoes great physical changes.

So far for naturalism. We may take a look at supernaturalism too. Maybe personal identity is constituted by the continuing existence of an indivisible soul, being the only essential part of a person, while the body is just a temporary and contingent part. This is basically the conception presented by Swinburne (1984) as the theory of classical dualism. If we assume that the soul sticks to the person from birth to death, and that it isn't affected by qualitative changes, i.e., by changes of physical or psychological properties, the dualist approach implies the

preservation of the person's identity no matter how great the physical and psychological changes may be. So the dualist approach too classifies as a weak theory of personal identity, containing the same defect as all the others.

Any theory of personal identity is either a strong or a weak one, for it either admits of the loss of identity through qualitative change, or it doesn't. If it doesn't, it's inadequate. If it does, however, it will fail to describe the relation of babies and adults as a relation of identity. Although there's no conclusive proof that any strong theory fails to do so, there's a good reason for this assumption: if the qualitative change is large enough, strong theories imply that the person has changed into some other person. But the process leading from babies to adults is just another qualitative change. In fact, it's the largest change in a person's life. Nevertheless we don't consider it a change of identity.

This is the reason why both strong and weak theories are doomed to fail. There are two kinds of processes, each involving a great qualitative change. A theory of personal identity, which could be said to be adequate, must describe these changes in different ways, one as a loss of identity, the other as a preservation of identity – although there's no essential difference between the two change processes. The main difference lies in the biological fact that every adult person has once been a baby, whereas only a few adult people go through a real change of personal identity. Since we all are familiar with the first kind of transformation, but usually not with the second one, we judge them differently as far as personal identity is concerned. And it's difficult, perhaps even impossible, to translate this contrast of attitude into a uniform theory.

A theory of personal identity that would suit both kinds of transformations would probably be a mixture of at least two theories, one for babies becoming adults, and one for adults becoming other adults. We could call such a mixture a "theory", but since it contains more than one criterion of personal identity, there are in fact more theories involved than just one. Therefore it is reasonable to adopt the view that personal identity cannot be sufficiently described by one theory alone.

Though this is a theoretical conclusion based on theoretical considerations, it's also backed by pre-philosophical discourse. People use the concept of personal identity in various ways, implicitly appealing to different identity criteria. Talking about the dead body of person X, e.g., people sometimes say, "This is X," implying that the person is just the body. But sometimes they say, "This is the *body* of X," implying that the person is *not* identical to the body. Of course, this pre-philosophical usage doesn't *force* philosophers to accept more than one identity criteria, but words like "person" and "identity" haven't been invented by philosophers. They have first been used by ordinary people. If philosophers are able to create a uniform theory that removes the ambiguity of pre-philosophical discourse, then they should have a right to replace pre-philosophical discourse by that theory. But in the absence of such a theory it may be better to retain the ambiguity.

I conclude with a short terminological remark. It's for those who doubt that babies are *persons*, and therefore hesitate to classify the identity of babies and adults as a relation of *personal* identity. As you will know, there's no agreement on what a person is. To mention just a few possibilities: some define persons simply as *human beings*, or as bearers of certain basic *rights*. Then, of course, babies are persons too. Others prefer to define

personhood through *rationality*, or *freedom*, or having *obligations*. If they are right, babies are probably no persons. But even if you deny that babies are persons, you must cope with the diachronic identity between babies and adults, however you call it. If babies are not persons, this diachronic identity is no *personal* identity, so we should give it a different name. We could provisionally call it "identity of human beings". In this terminology, my argument has not been concerned with personal identity, but with the identity of human beings.

## References

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