

Personal Identity

Christian Wüthrich

<http://philosophy.ucsd.edu/faculty/wuthrich/>

14 The Nature of Reality

Why we care about personal identity



- stability of substance that is bearer of properties, change
- bearer of emotions, desires, pleasures, qualia in general
- structuring the social world
- making sense of linguistic practices
- personhood in law, bearer of legal subjecthood
- criminal/ethical culpability
- theological relevance, esp. concerning an afterlife
- nostalgia

Qualitative vs. numerical identity

- Of course, no one remains **qualitatively** the same person—we constantly undergo change.
- But we remain **numerically** the same person, although we change qualitatively quite a bit.
- numerical sameness means no one else has taken your place ('numerical' because it's the same sort of identity that we find in mathematics, e.g. in $2 + 2 = 4$)

Question (Personal identity)

What make a person numerically the same over time?

Remarks before we discuss answers



- reconstitution (out of new matter) of person physically similar to you is insufficient \Rightarrow mere qualitative similarity (to look like John Malkovich is different from **being** John Malkovich)
 - More generally: sameness of matter not sufficient for personal identity
 - Nor is it necessary (and least not strictly)
- \Rightarrow Personal Id isn't especially tied to matter—but what is it tied to?

The soul

Answer (Soul)

*Personal identity is tied to **the soul**. “A person’s soul is her psychological essence, a nonphysical entity in which thoughts and feelings take place.” (Conee & Sider, 10)*



Diego Velazquez: Christ and the Christian Soul, 1626/28, Oil on canvas, National Gallery, London

Responses to the soul answer



Weighing the soul, 1875

Sider: there's no good reason to believe souls exist since

- ① There's no need to postulate souls explain the psychology of humans.
- ② Soul theorists can't explain how souls think: since souls have no smaller parts, a mechanistic explanation is impossible.

Here's a better response: either the soul is attached to the body or not.

- If not, all our criteria to judge personal id don't apply and everything is up for grabs again.
- If it is, then why not go for spatiotemporal or psychological continuity?

Spatiotemporal continuity

Answer (Spatiotemporal continuity)

Personal identity is tied to spatiotemporal continuity, i.e. to a continuous series of locations of a body in space and time.



- baseball example
- handy when dealing with identical twins
- good practical guide to personal id
- But does it capture its **essence**?
- essence vs. accident distinction: bachelor, gold examples
- This answer claims that spatiotemporal continuity **is** the essence of personal id

A refinement

Suppose you are melting into a soup. Is the soup you?

Answer (Refined spatiotemporal continuity)

*“[P]ersons are numerically identical if and only if they are spatiotemporally continuous via a series of **persons**.” (ibid., 13)*

Introduction and overview

Souls and continuity theories

Dennett: the self as a center of narrative gravity

The soul

Spatiotemporal continuity

Psychological continuity

Locke's counterexample: the prince and the cobbler



*"A certain prince wonders what it would be like to live as a lowly cobbler. A cobbler reciprocally dreams of life as a prince. One day they get their chance: **the entire psychologies of the prince and the cobbler are swapped**. The body of the cobbler comes to have all the memories, knowledge, and character traits of the prince, whose psychology has in turn departed for the cobbler's body. Locke himself spoke of souls: the souls of the prince and the cobbler are swapped. But let's change his story: suppose the swap occurs because the brains of the prince and cobbler are altered, without any transfer of soul or matter, by an evil scientist...*

“After the swap, the person in the cobbler’s body will remember having been the prince, and will remember the desire to try out life as a cobbler... He regards himself as being the prince, not the cobbler. And the person in the prince’s body regards himself as being the cobbler, not the prince. Are they right?

*“The spatiotemporal continuity theory says that they are **not** right... Locke takes a different view; he agrees with the prince and the cobbler.” (14)*

*“Here is a powerful argument on Locke’s side. Suppose the prince had previously committed a horrible crime... After the swap, the crime is discovered, and the guards come to take [...away...] the person in the prince’s body, ignoring his protestations of innocence. The person in the cobbler’s body (who considers himself the prince) remembers committing the crime and gloats over his narrow escape. This is a miscarriage of justice! The gloating person in the cobbler’s body ought to be punished. If so, then the person in the cobbler’s body **is** the prince, not the cobbler, for a person ought to be punished only for what he himself did.”*
(14f)

Psychological continuity

Answer (Psychological continuity)

"[A] past person is numerically identical to a future person, if any, who has that past person's memories, character traits, and so on—whether or not the future and past persons are spatiotemporally continuous with each other." (15)

- This answer can deal well with the case of the prince and the cobbler.
- But there's another counterexample...

Sir Bernard Williams (1929-2003): the case of Guy Fawkes



- A presently living person, 'Charles', is made to have the psychology of Guy Fawkes (a man hung in 1606 for trying to blow up the English Parliament).
- Locke: Charles **is** Guy Fawkes
- Now there's the rub: another man, 'Robert', undergoes the exact same change to have the psychology of Guy Fawkes...
- Both Charles and Robert are psychologically cont with Fawkes!
- Since **identity is transitive**, Robert must then be identical with Charles...

The duplication problem

- The **duplication problem**: what happens when psychological continuity is duplicated?
 - Sider: there's an analogous duplication problem for the spatiotemporal continuity theory
 - **Question**: how much continuity is sufficient spatiotemporal continuity?
 - Consider the case of the person whose right half is cancerous and removed by futuristic scientists (including the brain) and replaced by a prosthetic right body-half.
- ⇒ continuity of half the body had better count as sufficient
- ⇒ spst continuity theory faces its own duplication problem
- Consider the case when a fully cancerous person is divided into two halves to improve chance of survival (which in each case is 10%)

- ⇒ 1% chance that two copies will survive
- ⇒ Sider: “A single **original person** can be **continuous**, whether psychologically or spatiotemporally, with two **successor persons**.” (18)
- (Aside: does the soul theory face a duplication problem? Sider says no, but why not?)
- Restate positions such as to require **nonbranching continuity**.
- Psych: neither Charles nor Robert is Fawkes; Spatiotemporal: you don't survive the double-transplant operation
- But this is strange: if both hemispheres survive, you don't; if only one survives, you do too...

Two radical solutions

- ① **Derek Parfit** challenges the assumption that personal id is important:
 - What really matters is psychological continuity, regardless of personal identity.
 - In duplication case, ceasing to exist is not bad since you have all that matters: psychological continuity
- ② Challenge the assumption that personal id is numerical identity:
 - All change really does result in numerically distinct person.
 - branching cases: single person stands in relation of identity with two later persons, but that's not a problem if identity is not numerical

Dennett: the self as a center of narrative gravity



- Daniel Dennett (*1942), Tufts U
- General idea: self as **narrative center of gravity**, not physically detectable, evolutionarily grown, convenient fiction, needs not correspond to tangible or material entity
- but self is **enduring over time**

'The origin of selves'

'The origin of selves', *Cogito* 3 (1989).

"Since Descartes... we have had a vision of the self as a sort of immaterial ghost that owns and controls a body the way you own and control your car... Or is the very idea of a self nothing but a compelling fiction, a creed outworn, as some theorists insist, a myth we keep telling ourselves in spite of the advances of science that discredit it?"

“If selves are anything at all, then they exist. Now there are selves. There was a time, millions (or billions) of years ago when there were none—at least none on this planet. So there has to be—as a matter of logic—a true story to be told about how there came to be creatures with selves. This story will have to tell—as a matter of logic—about a process (or a series of processes) involving the activities or behaviors of things that do not yet have selves—or are not yet selves—but which eventually yield, as a new product, beings that do have selves. That is the true story I would like to tell...”

The evolutionary story of the self

- beings with **self**-preservation
- ⇒ boundaries become important: which parts of the object to be defended against intruders, enemies are in and which parts are is not (and thus likely an intruder)
- ⇒ biological agent becomes **selfish**
- example: immune system
- ⇒ origin of complex life forms was also the birth of the most primitive sort of **self**
- (“whatever sort of self is implied by the self-regards that prevents the lobster, when hungry, from eating itself.”)
- But do lobsters have a ‘self’?
- Certainly, they have **minimal selfhood**.



- “So a minimal self is not a **thing** inside a lobster or a lark, and it is not the ‘whole lobster’ or the ‘whole lark’ either; it is something abstract which amounts just to the existence of an organization which tends to distinguish, control and preserve portions of the world, an organization that thereby creates and maintains boundaries.
- “To a first approximation the principle that draws the boundary is this: **You are what you control and care for.**” (first emphasis is Dennett’s, second is mine)



- Does that mean that anthills, termite colonies, and beehives have a self?
- Dennett: “The group cohesion and coordination is so remarkable that hard-headed observers have been led to postulate the existence of a colony’s ‘group soul’.”
- Dennett seems perfectly happy to bite this bullet
- But what about humans?

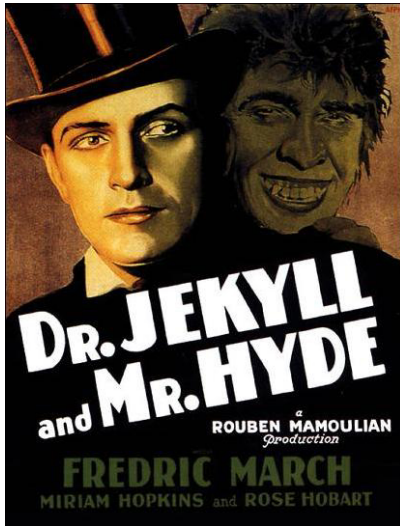
The human self

- Is a human's self entirely different from the implied self of a lobster or an ant colony?
- Dennett: yes and no
- People may extend their boundaries such as to include their automobiles, just like the hermit crab's shell.
- Sometimes, people shrink their boundaries (typically to eschew moral responsibility).
- Humans, unlike ants and hermit crabs, talk: crab's behaviour **implies** boundaries, it **tacitly** represents the self as including the shell, but it doesn't in any stronger sense **represent itself** as having a shell...
- "We, in contrast, are almost constantly engaged in presenting ourselves to others, and to ourselves, and hence **representing** ourselves—in language and gesture, external and internal."

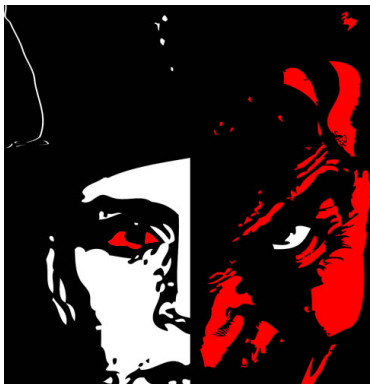
“Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not building dams or spinning webs, but telling stories—and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others—and ourselves—about who we are... we (unlike professional human storytellers) do not consciously and deliberately figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them; like spider webs, our tales are spun by us; our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source...”

*“These strings or streams of narrative issue forth **as if** from a single source...: their effect on any audience or reader is to encourage them to (try to) posit a unified agent whose words they are, about whom they are: in short, to posit what I call a **center of narrative gravity**. This is yet another abstraction, not a thing in the brain, but still a remarkably robust and almost tangible **attractor of properties**, the ‘owner of record’ of whatever items and features are lying about unclaimed.”*

Multiple personality disorder



- Could two or more selves vie for control of a single body?
- **Multiple personality disorder:** human body seems to be shared by several selves
- But how can a personality split if it's not a physical part of an organism, but an abstraction?
- human being creates (unconsciously) one or more fictive selves and then 'elects' the best supported of these into 'office' as her 'Head of Mind'



- Human does not **start out** as single or multiple—she starts out without any Head of Mind.
 - Normal development: she “slowly gets acquainted with the various possibilities of selfhood that ‘make sense’—partly through her own observation, partly through outside influence.”
- ⇒ “it may turn out that the clusters make **best sense** when attributed to different selves.”