

## 12. More on personal identity (2)\*

Martín Abreu Zavaleta

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By now we have seen a lot of different issues related to personal identity. Among other things, we have seen some problems arising from fission cases for continuity theories of personal identity. Though we mostly addressed them as problems for psychological continuity theories of personal identity, those kinds of problems can arise for bodily-continuity theories as well—though it's much more difficult to produce realistic cases of fission when it comes to bodily continuity.

Perhaps frustrated by the previous discussion, the character Dave in Perry's dialogue concludes that the debate about personal identity is merely a debate about how we use our words. Some people use 'personal identity' to mean bodily continuity, whereas some others use it to mean psychological continuity. There is no fact of the matter which of the two views is right, other than whatever fact result from a stipulation about how to use our words. Let's see how Dave might have arrived at this conclusion, and what can be said about it.

### 1 Convention and what matters

Dave introduces the following case. A woman called Julia North is involved in an accident. As a result, her body stops functioning but her brain is still intact. On the other hand, a woman called Mary Frances Beaudine has a stroke, so her brain doesn't work anymore, but the rest of her body is still fully operational. Some doctor transplants Julia's brain into Mary's body.

Who is the resulting person? Is it Mary Frances Beaudine or is it Julia North? Usually, we can come to know that two person stages are parts of the same person either because they have the same body, or because they exhibit the same personality and behave as if they remembered the same things. However, this case is one in which the two criteria conflict. In Dave's words:

This is a case in which two criteria we use to make judgments of identity conflict. Usually we expect personal identity to involve both bodily identity and psychological continuity. That is, we expect that if we have the same body, then the beliefs, memories, character traits, and the like also will be enormously similar. In this case, these two criteria which usually coincide do not. If we choose one criterion, we say that the survivor is Mary Frances Beaudine and she has undergone drastic psychological changes. If we choose the other, we say that Julia has survived with a new body. We have to choose which criterion is more important. It's a matter of choice of how to use our language, how to extend the concept "same person" to a new situation. (p. 40)

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\*The present notes use material from Jim Pryor's course on Central Problems in Philosophy, available at <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/courses/intro/>

In his paper “The self and the future” Bernard Williams also presents a case in which our intuitions seem to conflict. In *Case 1*, imagine we remove your brain and put it in B’s body, and B’s brain gets put in your body. We tell you that one of the two bodies will go through a painful operation without anesthesia, and you get to choose which one. Which one would you choose?

Now, surely it doesn’t matter all that much whether it is your actual brain that is transferred to B’s body. Perhaps it is enough that we scan all the information in your brain, scan all the information in B’s brain, and then transfer all the information which was originally in your brain to B’s brain. The information originally in B’s brain will now be in the brain which was originally yours. Now let me ask you again: if you were given the choice which of the two bodies will undergo the painful operation without anesthesia, which one would you choose? Most people are inclined to answer “let my original body undergo the painful operation” when facing these questions.

Now consider *Case 2*. Imagine that someone will torture you. In an attempt to comfort you, the torturer tells you that when the time for being tortured comes, you won’t remember that you’re about to be tortured. Still scary, right? Moments later, the torturer tells you that in fact, before the time for the torture comes, you will also have forgotten everything you now believe and who you are. Still pretty scary, right? If anything, it probably will seem even scarier.

The torturer comes back a few minutes later, and apologizes for the misunderstanding. In fact, before the torture, you won’t only have forgotten that you are about to be tortured, who you are and what you believe. In addition to that, they will implant new memories in your brain, memories belonging to some other person called B. The torturer will scan his brain and copy all the information into yours, but she will leave B’s brain as it is. This still sounds pretty bad: if you were given the chance to pay the torturer \$1000 in exchange for making the torture less painful, wouldn’t you rather pay him?

The torturer comes to your chamber one last time. He just wants you to know everything that will happen, and he notices he made a mistake before. As it happens, B’s brain won’t be left untouched. Instead, at the same time that we put B’s memories into your brain, he will put your memories into B’s brain. So what will happen is that you will think that you’re B and then get tortured, but B will think he’s you and go free. Isn’t that terrible?

When examining *Case 2*, many people would rather have their original body and brain go free. Notice that if in the previous step of *Case 2* you were inclined to think that your original body would still be you, this puts pressure on thinking the same thing in the last case. For it seems compelling to think that personal identity depends only on intrinsic matters, i.e. on how person stages are in themselves. So if you think that the original body would still be you in the second to last step, you should think the same in the last step, since the only difference between the two is extrinsic to what happens with the person stages involved.

What’s interesting about *Cases 1* and *2* is that they pretty much describe the same situation. The only significant difference is how that situation is described. In *Case 1*, we were inclined to think that wherever our memories and information went, we also went there. In *Case 2*, many of us would prefer the original body and brain to go free and let the other body undergo the torture. So even though we consider one and the same situation, our intuitions can lead us in different ways, depending on how we describe it.

That our intuitions conflict in some cases like the Julia North/Mary Frances Beaudine and Williams’s two cases may make some people think that there simply is no fact of the matter who is identical to who; our concept of personal identity is defective somehow, and the best thing to do is to distinguish between two concepts of personal identity: one which privileges psychological

continuity, and one that privileges bodily continuity.

However, things are not quite so easy. One of the reasons we care about personal identity has to do with our anticipation of the things that will happen to future person stages, or fear of the pain that they may undergo. We anticipate or fear those things because we think that they will happen to *us*. No amount of linguistic convention could solve the issue what we should care about. Gretchen puts the point nicely:

Now this is clearly absurd. If it were correct, in the first place, to anticipate having the sensations and thoughts that the survivor is to have the next day, the decision of nine old men a thousand or so miles away wouldn't make me wrong. And if I was wrong to so anticipate, their decision couldn't make me right. How can the correctness of my anticipation of survival be a matter of the way we use words? If it is not such a matter, then my identity is not either. My identity with the survivor, my survival, is a question of fact, not of convention. (pp. 41-2)

## 2 The importance of psychological continuity

At this point, Dave seems more amenable to endorsing a psychological continuity theory of identity. He thinks that this is the better view because it explains two important pieces of data:

- (a) The asymmetry between the way we care about what happens to others and the way we care about what will happen to us.
- (b) Our ability to know that we are the same people as some past person-stage without needing to know that we have the same body.

Let's start with the first. Oftentimes, the kind of properties that other people care about, when it comes to *our* personal identity, are psychological. What makes a person be the subject of like or dislike, love or hate, are for the most part psychological features. Since such features are so important to others, it's only reasonable to think that they would be at least as important to us. Insofar as psychological continuity is important, then, we can explain why there is a sort of asymmetry between our care for other people and our care for ourselves. We care about ourselves in a special way because we care about certain psychological features, desires and beliefs. So a theory on which psychological continuity is sufficient and necessary for personal identity seems to get this right. On the other hand, we don't seem to care about bodily identity or continuity all that much. We could get fatter or slimmer, but we wouldn't care about what would happen to those versions of ourselves any less.

However, as Gretchen points out, and as should be more or less clear from one of Williams's case 2, we don't always have this kind of egoistic concern for someone who is psychologically continuous with us, but doesn't have our same body or brain. Moreover, psychological continuity by itself is subject to the fission problems, so perhaps we should add that sameness of body or brain is at least necessary for identity.

Unfortunately, this new move seems to lack the advantages of the original psychological continuity theory when it comes to data points (a) and (b). Now a person needs to know whether she has the same brain or the same body in order to know that she is the same person as some previous person. Even more unfortunately, suppose that we have two psychologically indiscernible people, but

one of them has my original brain. The psychological continuity theory said that we had the special egoistic concern about ourselves because of some psychological features. If it is true that I should have the egoistic concern only for future versions of myself, then I should only care about the person that has my original brain. Yet in this new case two people have exactly the same psychological features, so the psychological features wouldn't seem to be what I cared about after all.

### 3 The unimportance of identity

In his paper "The unimportance of identity" Derek Parfit argues for two theses. The first thesis is that some questions about identity have no determinate answers. The second, more controversial thesis, is that personal identity is not what we really care about. What really matters to us are psychological connections that we have to future person stages. In particular, it matters that some future person stage will quasi-remember from the inside most of the things that happened to our current person stage, and that the future person stage has the same personality, long term projects and desires as us.

James Pryor illustrates the issue as follows:

Consider a community of people who have this genetic quirk which makes them always have identical twins when they bear children. Suppose these people also have a psychological quirk which makes it very important for their childhood development not to be an only child. Once in a while, one of the twins is in an accident and so the other one has to grow up an only child, and this causes severe psychological problems later in life. This community will think: it's very important that every child have a twin.

But now suppose that something changes, and some of the people start to bear triplets instead of twins. Now the children that are born don't have twins. (If you're a triplet, then neither of your siblings counts as "your twin.") Should the community be upset about this? No, they shouldn't. They should realize that's what important is not really that every child have a twin, but rather that every child have at least one sibling. Triplets would be just as good as twins. (Perhaps even better, since now there's less chance that an accident will leave behind only one child.) This community was just confused, because as they were at the start of the story, having a twin was the ordinary way of getting what's really important.

Parfit thinks that the situation with respect to personal identity is much like the situation of the people in this community. We think that personal identity is important, but we only think that it is important because it is grounded in psychological continuity. If there was some other relation that is not personal identity but still entails psychological continuity, it would be at least as valuable to us as true identity.

Parfit thinks that, the closer we get psychologically to someone, the more we should be concerned with that person in an egoistic or first-personal way. So, for instance, in certain cases involving teletransportation, regardless of whether you are identical to one of the people coming out of the teletransporter, you should care equally about the two of them. Moreover, if given a choice between saving the life of some person stage that is identical to you but whose psychological connections to you are very weak, and saving the life of a person who is not you but has very strong (or direct, e.g. remember more of the things that happened to her, have the same personality, etc.) psychological

connections to you, your first-person concern should be with the latter. **Question:** What do you think about this view? Is Parfit right?