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How We Each Maintain Our Personal Identity

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In this essay I will address the broad topic of personal identity. This topic deals with the problem of how we can truly claim that a person is the same person throughout his life or indeed over any period of his life. What is it about a person that means I can refer to him as a continuing entity? I will argue that some traditional approaches to identity miss the real question and propose that identity resides in a self's characteristic interaction with the world.

One's first response may well be that no, a person is never the same from one moment to the next, we refer to people by the same names only for convenience. Our experiences, our environment changes us and also we change ourselves from within. Our body is programmed to change when we grow older. Indeed we are not even the same from moment to moment, we have moods.

And is there even a self to talk about at all? Hume saw us as composed of our experience. We have a perspective but the viewer himself is elusive and indescribable. When we examine ourselves to find our self we find nothing but the present content of our experience.

So when we talk of our own lives what are we talking of, what is it that is born and dies? What is a self?

First let us be clear on some terms. We clearly accept that at no two points is a person identical in body or in mind, 'Maximum similarity within the groupings would limit them to atomic-point-instants. The purpose of the identity notion is wider breadth, but a grouping that included everything would not convey specific information'¹². But this in my opinion is a different question from that of identity and here the main thrust of this essay differs from the view that, 'the relation of identity is logically one-one: I cannot be identical to two distinct people.'¹³ Identity is an abstract

¹² Robert Nozick, *Personal Identity Through Time* (pg 108 of *Personal Identity* ed. by Martin and Barresi, 2007)

¹³ Brian Garrett, *Personal Identity* in *The Shorter Routledge Encyclopedia Of Philosophy*, 2005

term and refers to a thing's essence – what it is that makes it what it is, what distinguishes it from another thing, a description that marks its boundaries, the definition of a thing. So the identity of a person is that which matches the definition of a person. So now we can see that the 'ever-changing' argument against a persisting self misses the point of the question of identity.

To support this use of the term identity, Locke's consciousness theory¹⁴ clearly defines personal identity in terms of a continuation of the same consciousness (or memory) which nonetheless does change over time. And psychological reductionism argues for a similar thing – former selves share the same identity with future selves in virtue of sharing memories and beliefs and a development occurring from former to future states. Traditional responses to fission thought experiments treat identity as being a matter of sameness¹⁵. Consider the case of a single person's brain being split into two so that two brains are made that share exactly the same characteristics and are then placed into two bodies that share exactly the same characteristics. The puzzle asks whether the two descendents of the original brain, or the descendents and the original, share the same identity. Some contemporary theorists argue that the descendents cannot both be the same as the original since then they would both be the same as each other. I argue that this does not reflect the meaning of identity; I will return to my answer to this question.

In addition I am not attempting to find the criteria for ascertaining identity but what identity consists of in itself. Sydney Shoemaker in his 'Personal Identity and Memory'¹⁶ treats memory as a criterion for ascertaining identity. He found that both bodily and mental criteria are used to ascertain identity in the third person and I am sure this is right but it does not answer the question of what it is to be someone and not someone else. He uses Locke's cobbler and prince thought experiment in which a prince wakes up in a cobbler's body (a case of bodily transfer) and the question is whether this person is now the prince or the cobbler. Shoemaker finds the case ambiguous since the two criteria bodily and mental are in conflict. I will argue however that it is not ambiguous.

Now to what we mean by self: I propose that it is the interaction between the internal and external. The self is the predictable result of interaction with the environment. It is an amorphous mass which forms into different shapes according to what environment it faces. Further, consider what things we think do not have selves. These include minerals and plants. Some people consider animals to have selves but on a much more limited basis than people. Indeed we do not consider animals to be persons. The notion of person is I think closely connected to a self. It is a matter of agency, the imposition of action on the environment. Harry Frankfurt has a similar thought, 'It is only through our recognition of a world of stubbornly independent reality, fact, and truth that we come both to recognise our selves as beings distinct from others and to articulate the specific nature of our own identities.'¹⁷ Selves are things that have agency, causal power in the way rocks and plants do not. A self is distinct from its environment; rocks and plants are just considered members of the environment rather than a thing which has a separate, contained being.

So from this we can now conclude the identity of the self, the person: I suggest that it is the particular, predictable reaction to the environment, whether this is in terms of behaviour or internal mental events. With regard to the fission puzzle; if the situation were extended to imagine that the two fission descendents were placed into two different worlds then I would argue that they do share the same identity despite being distinct entities and they also share the same identity as the original.

14 John Locke, Chapter 27 of *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (2nd edition), 1690 and in *Personal Identity*, ed. by John Perry, 2008 (first published 1975)

15 p2 of *Personal Identity*, edited by Raymond Martin and John Barresi, 2007

16 Sydney Shoemaker, "Personal Identity," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.56, No.22 (October 22, 1959). And in *Personal Identity*, ed. by John Perry, 2008 (first published 1975)

17 Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Truth*, 2006 (p101, published by Pimlico, 2007)

When faced with different environments they will react in the same way and therefore have the same identity. In the case of the prince and the cobbler it follows that the person who wakes up is the prince since it is in the mind that the characteristic interaction with the environment is produced. The body is just a tool for interacting with the environment.

For me the problem of personal identity is treated by Nozick and others in a confused manner. A distinction must be made between quantitative and qualitative identity. It is the case that two people can be qualitatively identical since they may both have the same properties but for sure no two people can be quantitatively identical since they are by definition two separate whole people. Nozick's closest continuer theory of personal identity¹⁸ concerns *qualitative* similarity between a person at different points in time. The causal connection and similarity of and between two 'person stages' means that they share the same identity, and whichever 'person stage' in the future is most closely related to the original takes precedence and continues to hold that identity. However there is no reason, according to the earlier distinction in terms, why there cannot be two or more holders of the same qualitative identity. Does it matter that two merely quantitatively different people had different pasts and so causes for their beings? If they share the same makeup (which contains within it a history of thought) then this is all that is needed to discern their shared identity in the present.

In addition, the view that identity is an extrinsic property, something that depends on persons other than the person in question (for example in the case of the two identical fission descendents), strikes me as very odd. It does not make sense to say that a person's identity depends on another thing for it to obtain or that a person can cease to continue his identity because there is a tie between two closest continuers. Whether I am who I am should depend on something about me and not on something else otherwise my identity is not a fact *about me* at all it is just the trivial dividing of the world into separate entities.

I think a lot of the concern over the nature of personal identity and in particular with regard to fission cases is the question over subjective continuation of experience. How can one center of experience result in two or more centers of experience? This is exemplified in the case of teletransportation. A replica of a man is on Mars after his cells were copied. Or in the case where half a brain can continue the functionality of a person and each half is separated into two different bodies. For we regard one center of experience (one experiencer) as mutually exclusive of all others. I do not propose to answer this question here as I am providing an objective account of personal identity but this issue may account for why it is argued that only one person can have one identity.

It does happen that we consider the identity of a person to have changed. This can only come from the environment. This compromises the person's agency by itself imposing a change in the characteristic interaction of the person. An example of this would be the onset of Alzheimer's or the loss of sight (though not necessarily). The objection to this may be that despite the extreme nature of the change, the self is just interacting with the environment in the same way as a less extreme external situation. The difference I argue is that the environment can act to diminish the agent's causal power without the agent having autonomy over the change.

Any change brought about by the person of his own characteristic interaction with the environment (a 'self forming action') and causal power is a result of the original person acting. The different future interaction is therefore a characteristic of the same identity. This raises however the question of free will and whether in fact as Kane suggested there is a process by which we can change

18 Robert Nozick, *Personal Identity Through Time* (In *Personal Identity* ed. by Martin and Barresi, 2007)

ourselves and our identities¹⁹. Are there situations where a person could have gone in one of two different directions or do we owe our present self to our original self? In terms of identity I think it is the case that we are the sum of the different decisions held together in a chain linked to our original selves. Our present self can be traced back to the original self and therefore holds the same identity. All the decisions made would not have been made had it not been for the nature of that original self.

In conclusion I have found that the identity of a self is held in that self's characteristic interaction with the environment and that two quantitatively different selves hold the same qualitative identity. In addition I have found that the environment can impose a change on the identity of a self and that a self and the environment are in a conflict of causal powers.

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