In what sense are you the same person today that you were when you were ten?

Introduction

The question is closely related to the persistence of “self” through time. It is an important question because it answers matters of survival and responsibility. I only survive in the future if there exists a person at that time who is identical to me. Commonly, personal identity is defined as what determines a person’s responsibility and survival. One belief is that personal identity persists because of memory [1], and thus you are the same person today as you were ten because you inherit memories when you are ten. And define how personal identity persists through time, will provide an answer to the question of in what sense are we the same through time.

A simple objection to the memory criterion is that people forget and misremember things, even if that can be solved by incorporating broader psychological features, more complex scenarios, especially the Fission problem [2], make it difficult to define a comprehensive criterion for personal identity, with some arguing that personal identity does not, in fact, matter or is required. Thus to answer the question, there must exist a criterion that can reasonably solve these paradoxes.

For I shall dismiss criteria solely based on the physical body and of immaterial souls [3], and begin the discussion with consciousness.

Consciousness and Psychological Continuity

Persons are identical if they share the same consciousness. One can say the continuity of memory is sufficient for consciousness to persist – the memory criterion [4]. By definition, if person A at time t+n has the memories of person B at time t, then person A and B share the same consciousness, and by extension, they are identical persons. However, problems arise when memories discontinue or when one misremembers.

In the example of the brave officer [5], a young boy is flogged for theft, when he becomes an officer, he remembers the flogging. When the officer becomes an old general, he does not remember getting flogged but remembers being a brave officer. The young boy is the old general, but according to the memory criterion, they are not identical because the old general does not remember the flogging.

By defining identity as transitive, the boy is identical to the officer, and the officer is identical to the general, then the boy is identical to the general. One can also incorporate broader psychological features, and causal continuity [6], there is now a stronger continuity when memory fails. This is regarded as the psychological criterion. To answer the question using this criterion, it must first be examined through thought experiments.

The Fission Problem

The standard fission problem presents a scenario in which a person's brain, supposed to carry the person's memory, is split equally into halves and transferred to two new bodies [7]. According to the psychological criterion, the two products are psychologically continuous to the original person. If the original person is A, and the two offsprings are B and C respectively, then A=B and A=C. However, the transitivity of personal identity means B must also be identical to C. However, because B and C are not identical, there exists a contradiction. However, suppose person A experienced an incident and loses exactly half of the brain, the person after the incident is intrinsically identical to either person B or C concerning A in fission. Except, in this case, personal identity persists.

Conditions for distinction. I start by observing that the conclusion presupposes that persons B and C are distinct. In an extreme case, suppose the brain is not lateralized and both parts share the same memory contents. Immediately after the fission operation, persons B and C continue to experience identical events. Suppose hard determinism [8] is true, B and C will continue to develop the same characters and consciousness. Thus, yielding a scenario where person A lives in two bodies. This shows a person can exist in two bodies after fission – at least transitivity alone cannot invalidate this view.

Psychological Connectedness.
Parfit suggests that a person might be able to survive between the two bodies after fission, in addition to the new persons, resulting in a total of 3 persons after fission. Parfit dismisses this possibility citing a scenario of a duel between the two. [9] However, there is more potential to this than explored, which I will revisit later. Parfit then argues that there exist scenarios, like fission, where psychological continuity persists while personal identity does not. It is not personal identity that matters, however, but psychological connectedness, of varying degrees, that matters for one's concern of survival and wellbeing, as well as responsibilities. This does resolve the fission problem, but as Parfit himself remarked, this interpretation weakens "loyalty to, or love of, other particular selves". The same person from a different time is only identical to the degree to which they are psychologically connected.

Perdurantism and Overlapping Persons.
Objects and persons can be considered to extend through time, at any moment a person is but a temporal slice [10], or a person–stage as defined by David Lewis. Continuation between the person–stages, similar to psychological continuation, is denoted as the R–Relation. If the person–stages of two persons are all R–related, they are in I–Relation. Persons in I–relations are identical. Person A is in I–relation with persons B and C respectively, and thus they are continuous. But because persons B and C are not in I–relation with each other, they are not continuous individuals. This is no longer the standard identity that requires transitivity, but"tense–identity" that Lewis defined.

Persons B and C exist as one person A before time t. At time t of fission, B, and C would exist in the two offsprings and would not need to be identical. However, how could persons B and C be discerned before time t, if they are logically distinct? In certain more complex

scenarios, such as a delayed fission in which the creation of one offspring occurs later than the other, goes against Lewis' definition that both B and C must exist simultaneously.

Three Persons Adaptation

Revisiting Parfit's suggestion of three persons after fission [11]. Suppose fission occurs at time t, before time t, there is one body and one identity, this is person A. After time t, two bodies are created with apparent persons B and C. As both persons are directly psychologically connected with person A, the identity of person A must have survived in both persons. Two new identities, X and Y, are also created in persons B and C respectively. Thus, each of the resulting bodies contains two identities, the original person A is shared between the two bodies. To prevent ambiguity, persons B and C can be seen as the two bodies, or the hybrid of either X or Y and A, which I will clarify later.

Unlike Lewis' case [12], there are no overlapping persons that cannot be discerned. The original person A can be defined as the intersection of B and C, $A = B \cap C$. By definition, X, and Y would be the difference between B and C. If persons B and C both remember A enjoying fishing as a child or believes in god, or being a kind person, it is plausible to say that A survived fission in both bodies.

Applying this to the fission scenario, after time t, person A survives between the two bodies. This does not break transitivity as person A is defined only as the shared attributes between B and C. When one intuitively states that B and C are different, they are referring to the distinction between X and Y. I will visit the relation between X or Y and A later.

To answer Parfit's example of a duel between B and C, there would only be two persons involved, X and Y. A does not participate in the duel because person A cannot fight itself. I will revisit the case in which B or C is killed later.

What is the relation between persons X or Y, and A? Person A after time t, is now defined as the "dormant-identity", such that X and Y takes the initiative after fission. Memories and thoughts that X and Y experience after fission belongs to X and Y respectively, and not A, in regular scenarios. This is derived from the definition of A itself after time t, I will show later that the same definition can yield a different interpretation in another scenario.

I do not completely dismiss Parfit's psychological continuity, for his definition of quasi-memories can be adapted here. A memory shared between B and C that belongs to A before time t, can be considered as a q-memory. This is consistent with Parfit's explanation of one's relation with the pre-fission host. By extension to Parfit's definition, X and Y are psychologically continuous with A, but they are not identical persons. This has useful implications.

Existence of X and Y

I have proposed a scenario in fission which according to hard-determinism yields completely identical persons. Here, person A, by definition is the whole of persons B and C. X and Y would equal to void, which can be interpreted as nonexistent. Indeed, if two persons are

completely identical, then there's still only one person after fission. Person A by definition avoided the creation of redundant identities.

Annihilation of A

If persons B and C share nothing in common, how would person A be defined? It should be guaranteed that immediately after time t, B, and C would inherit all if not large portions of A's consciousness for A to have existed. The case of complete amnesia for one or both after t is no longer a case of fission. Thus, person A would have existed until some time at t+n. One can suggest that person A is annihilated at t+n, as it's defined as void. However, this is not a satisfactory answer for when A has committed a crime before time t, simply for one of the resulting persons to become entirely different, frees the other – who may still inherit much of person A's memories – of his moral responsibilities. As stated earlier, both X and Y are psychological and causally continuous with A. Thus, when A cannot survive in two bodies, perhaps it can survive in one. This is different from saying that person A survives fission in only one body because both are equal immediately after time t. At t+n however, there is now a difference on what degree X and Y are psychologically connected with A. Thus, person A would survive in the person that is most psychologically connected with A, consistent with Parfit's idea that people can be psychologically connected to various degrees. If this person was X, then X would merge with A. This is not a case of fusion, as by defining A, X, and Y as logically discernible, only one memory exists at any time for each B and C. The q–memories belonging to A, would now simply become memories of X. At this time, t+n, neither X nor A ceases to exist, but have merged and thus can be referred to interchangeably. In the case that B or C dies, then a similar merging of A and the surviving person would occur. Regarding Parfit's scenario of a murder in a duel, X would have killed Y and merges with A so that only one person leaves the duel.

Conclusion

By examining the fission problem, I adapt a criterion based on psychological continuation in which ideas such as varying degrees of psychological connectedness can serve as a valid criterion for determining personal identity in cases such as fission, whilst preserving the importance and simplicity of personal identity in such questions. With a valid criterion, I can now answer the question: You are the same person today that you were ten years ago in the sense of a continuation of psychological features such as memories, beliefs, and characters.

Footnote

1 John Locke, 1689
2 David Wiggins 1967
3 René Descartes 1641
4 John Locke, 1689
5 Thomas Reid
6 Shoemaker 1979, 1984
7 Derek Parfit 1971
8 Derek Parfit 1971
9 Derek Parfit 1971, “Suppose the resulting people fight a duel. Are there three people fighting, one on each side, and one on both?”
10 David Lewis 1976
11 Derek Parfit 1971
12 David Lewis 1976

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