

compos mentis

The Mind of Personal Identity: A Criticism of the Psychological Criterion

Kathleen Berta

University of Michigan-Flint

ABSTRACT

Many arguments that forward the psychological criterion of personal identity seem to rely on the presence of external criteria, especially external sources that can inform the individual of his or her state. Whether or not the psychological criterion is preferable when judging what defines personal identity is not something this essay will address. This essay will focus on clarifying the type of evidence that should be used when supporting the psychological criterion. Evidence for the psychological criterion of personal identity should be based on internal criteria. To be specific, something should exist within every individual that defines their identity without any reliance on external sources of knowledge. This essay will mainly support this argument using amnesia as an example. An amnesiac may be able to retain the identity held in their pre-amnesiac state, but any evidence of their identity that relies on knowledge obtained externally should not count under the psychological criterion. Scenarios in which there is a complete lack of consciousness will also be gone over.

KEYWORDS

Personal Identity, Psychological Criterion, Amnesia, External and Internal Criteria, Mind

INTRODUCTION TO THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITERION

With personal identity in question, some philosophers would argue that an individual's own consciousness or psychological awareness makes up their being. It follows that one's own personal identity would change along with changes in their psychological state, especially in cases where the very personality, mindset, or memories of an individual appear to drastically change.¹ These beliefs make up the psychological criterion of personal identity. This essay will argue that a changed psychological state is not sufficient to change somebody's personal identity, an assertion which will be applied to the case of amnesia. A pre-amnesiac person still shares the same identity with their amnesiac self. Though their psychological state, including their memories, have changed, they have not literally become a different person. This essay will not try to explain what exactly constitutes personal identity or *what* exactly should be retained in order for one's personal identity to remain intact, but will argue against the psychological criterion of personal identity as it is defined now. People who forward the psychological criterion and insist that personal identity changes with psychological changes are incorrect. At the least, the psychological criterion of personal identity does not adequately explain the limits of personal identity.

On what exactly constitutes personal identity, numerous philosophers such as Locke (1694) have argued that such a thing should be based on a psychological criterion. An individual should be identified by what their current psychological state is, so a change in one's psychological state would lead to a change in their personal identity. This holds true even if such a change is brought on by something along the lines of an illness such as amnesia. So if somebody—for the sake of simplicity, let's call him George—suffers from retrograde amnesia, meaning he has no memories of events that occurred before the onset of the condition, then he might as well count as an entirely new individual under the psychological criterion. People familiar with George may have their own memories of the pre-amnesiac George, but George would no longer be that remembered person under the psychological criterion. However, is it really possible for an entirely new personal identity, or an entirely new person, to be created simply by altering somebody's psychological state?

1. This essay will not attempt to argue for the physical criterion, which asserts that personal identity is defined by a continuous physical thing, namely, the physical brain. It will only argue that the psychological criterion does not adequately explain personal identity.

Some may argue that the personal identity of George is equivalent to their general psychological state, in which case an amnesiac George truly would be an entirely different person. Such an individual would no longer possess the same personal identity if they were to suffer amnesia. Derek Parfit, for example, notes this in his *Reasons and Persons*. If somebody were to flip a switch that wiped George's memories and then gave him a complete set of memories entirely consistent with the ones Napoleon had, then George would no longer be George (Parfit 1984, Section 84). If anything, George would be more like Napoleon. This essay would argue that George is still George, whether with his own memories intact or with memories identical to Napoleon's. While George would most likely act differently than he typically would in his pre-Napoleon-minded state, George would still be George, but with a different set of memories. The amnesia-afflicted individual does *not* possess a different personal identity than the original individual who did not have amnesia.

THE STATE OF GEORGE

If the pre-amnesiac George were to somehow know that he would suffer from amnesia on a later date, George would empathize with his amnesia-ridden future self. Pre-amnesiac George may feel some amount of fear, knowing that he will develop amnesia. As pointed out by Bernard Williams, a person who knows that their memories will be removed immediately before they are tortured will still feel trepidation at the thought of being tortured (Williams 1973, 167). The tortured person will have no memory of the torture taking place, but the pre-torture person still fears for what will be their tortured self. The pre-amnesiac's connection to the actual amnesiac may seem clear in this example, considering the pre-amnesiac is psychologically connected to the amnesiac—the pre-amnesiac knows that they will suffer from amnesia. The true difficulty lies in explaining how the amnesiac individual, somebody with absolutely no internal psychological connection to the pre-amnesiac individual, could possibly empathize with that pre-amnesiac individual. After all, if we are to argue that the pre-amnesiac and amnesiac are identical, then they should both possess a similar feeling of connection to each other.

As George progresses to having amnesia, some may argue that he is losing his psychological continuity. Ultimately, his past and future selves are incompatible because they have no knowledge of each other. However, it has already been

explained how the pre-amnesiac can empathize with the future amnesiac. For this to happen as told by Williams, however, the pre-amnesiac *must* be fully aware that they will develop amnesia. A pre-amnesiac who is entirely ignorant of what will happen is not much different than the amnesiac in terms of how much they can empathize with their current and other selves. Pre-amnesiac George would have absolutely no internal psychological connection to the amnesiac George. The pre-amnesiac and amnesiac share no similar memories and both must be told of each other for there to be any semblance of recognition between them. Therefore, if the pre-amnesiac is never told that they will suffer from amnesia, then they will have no internal psychological connection to the amnesiac. Likewise, if the amnesiac is never told that they suffered from amnesia, then they will have no internal psychological connection to the pre-amnesiac. This is not the case once both the pre-amnesiac and amnesiac are made aware of each other, but it seems as though they both must be made aware of each other. It seems ridiculous that the pre-amnesiac and amnesiac are identical in one scenario, but not identical in the other. Under the rules of personal identity, something that explains a continuous being, it cannot be possible for two individuals to be identical in some cases and not identical in others, a point brought up by Locke in his *Of Identity and Diversity* (1694). So one of the following must be true in regards to all versions of George: a) the pre-amnesiac George and amnesiac George are identical in all cases or b) the pre-amnesiac George and amnesiac George are *not* identical in all cases.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CRITERIA OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

The scenario in which some may argue that the pre-amnesiac and the amnesiac are not the same person would be if they were completely ignorant of each other. Realistically, this possibility seems remarkably small when considering that George merely has to come across the knowledge of his condition, which will automatically generate a psychological connection between the pre-amnesiac and amnesiac George. This would count as *external criteria of personal identity*—George's identity has supposedly been retained because of external means. As mentioned before, however, this may never happen and the pre-amnesiac and amnesiac George may remain ignorant of each other and possess no psychological connection. This is what the current definition of the psychological criterion does not address. What determines personal identity should not rely on external criteria for this very reason. The pre-amnesiac George and amnesiac

George either are or are not identical. If we relied solely on external sources of knowledge for determining the identity of George (for example, if we were to rely on whether a doctor informs George of his condition), then the true identity of the man George would be capable of changing. Therefore, if the psychological criterion of personal identity is true, then there must be something constant within George himself. This something makes up the *internal criteria of personal identity*. As stated in the introduction, this essay will not attempt to argue what that constant thing is, but rather explain how amnesia or a lack of psychological continuity does not imply that a pre-amnesiac and amnesiac are different people.

PERSONAL IDENTITY AND THE EMPTY SHELL

The recently amnesia-afflicted individual is still the same person as their pre-amnesiac self, but is in a different state of mind or has a different “addition.” George is still consistent with their pre-amnesiac self in that they have the same continuous brain, most likely the same relations they had to other people, and still exist in a world that was shaped by their pre-amnesiac self. Let’s say that George worked as engineer at a particular company before he suffered amnesia and was eventually promoted to being a manger over the years. George would still have some connection to that company and everything he accomplished at it even if he didn’t remember any of it. For example, even if George loses memory of the company itself, he may still possess skills he used while employed at that company. George may have the potential to quickly learn advanced calculus, drafting, or possess outstanding leadership skills, for instance. Even if he is manipulated by somebody into believing that he is a high school dropout who works at a local fast food joint, there are bound to be some things that are carried over from his job as an engineer. At least some aspects of the man known as George remain consistent over time and are not entirely dependent on external, non-personal criteria.²

This essay’s argument for strictly internal criteria for the psychological criterion of personal identity is based around the idea that something will remain consistent over time, even through radical personality changes or memory losses. What this essay will call the *Empty Shell Argument* is worth bringing up here. Relating this

2. Parfit has a Reductionist view of personal identity, holding that personal identity remains consistent if certain facts about a person hold true over time and that these facts are largely impersonal.

back to Williams's example, we could imagine that George is about to undergo a process that will, in part, completely erase his memories. However, unlike in Williams's example, George will *not* be given new memories in this scenario. In addition, this process will not only completely erase his concrete memories, but also eliminate his ability to function consciously (meaning, he will not be able to form propositional thoughts, he will lose his ability to speak, he will lose the ability to perform basic and complex tasks, he will lose any potential he had to perform those basic and complex tasks, and so on). If George were to end up in such a state under the Empty Shell Argument, would he still possess his personal identity or would it be gone? After all, the Empty Shell George would not only lack psychological connection to his former self, but would also appear to lack a psychological state.

Perhaps the most relevant thing to wonder at this point would be whether the man George still exists. George as an empty shell lacks the ability to function even on a basic level. While it's been stated before that this essay will not attempt to prove *what* exactly must be retained in order for personal identity to remain consistent, this essay will be bold enough to argue that such a thing should be a conscious thing. After all, if George was not at all conscious, he essentially would not be much different from a robot. In the case of the Empty Shell Argument, George would lack a personal identity.

FINAL WORDS

To relate George's amnesiac case back to a philosopher discussed earlier, Bernard Williams largely disagrees with Parfit's take on personal identity, insisting that psychological continuity is not at all required for somebody's personal identity to remain consistent. For all intents and purposes, this essay sympathizes with Williams's dismissal of the psychological criterion, but not with his reasons why. The second case presented in Williams's *The Self and the Future* is worth noting here, with it providing a fictional example about somebody whose memories (or at least part of their memories) will be destroyed. The person, dubbed Person A, in Williams's example is told that they will be tortured sometime in the future. However, they are also told that their memories will be altered in the following ways: Person A's memory of learning that they will be tortured will be destroyed before it happens, *all* of the memories Person A has at that point will be destroyed before they are tortured, Person A will be given an entirely

different set of memories, and this entirely different set of memories will be identical the memories held by somebody else, Person B, who is never going to be tortured. Ideally, Person A would not care that they are about to be tortured under personal identity's psychological criterion, because they have been given information that their memories will be altered to the point where they won't remember being tortured. However, Williams points out the obvious: Person A *would* care, indicating that they aren't as connected to their psychological states as some people may insist.³ However, Person A caring depends entirely on them being told about what's going to happen. This furthers the point above about George. While George may lose their memories, the pre-amnesiac George would still be able to empathize with their amnesiac self, provided that they are properly informed by an external source. Based on this external condition, the same would also apply to the amnesiac George's awareness of the pre-amnesiac George.

The limitations on Williams's view have already been gone over. Parfit's Reductionist view holds that personal identity simply consists of various facts about an individual's own continuity. Parfit himself, while acknowledging that this is opposed to what many before him thought, believes that his view is an improvement over past views on personal identity. While more inclusive than past views, the Reductionist view still falls short when explaining how various mental states are connected by strictly internal causes. Even Parfit's explanations of drastically changed psychological and physical states rely on the individual obtaining knowledge of their condition from some external source. This reliance on something external to one's own being is still remarkably flimsy and a poor way to judge the continuity of personal identity. As explained before, relying on external sources of knowledge makes personal identity become too circumstantial.

3. For the sake of space, Parfit's response to Williams will not be gone over in much detail in this essay. Parfit points out how Person A has a specific connection to their supposed consistent psychological identity—Person A cares that they will be tortured. This level of connection puts their psychological connection on a spectrum. For example, exactly how many aspects of the psychological criterion are required to connect two beings in two different states? The same can be applied to the physical criterion. For example, in Parfit's *Physical Spectrum*, at what point would somebody become a different person if we were to replace bit by bit of their physical brain? What if only 1% of their brain were replaced, followed by 2%, 3%, 4%, and so on? They would still possess the same personal identity on this spectrum if we were to apply the same criteria Williams uses. Parfit ultimately argues that neither a physical or psychological criterion are truly necessary for the continuity of one's personal identity.

compos mentis

If the psychological criterion is to hold any water in this debate, then it should be bound to explaining the continuity of personal identity without external bases.

REFERENCES

Parfit, Derek. 1984, 1986. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Williams, Bernard. 1970. "The Self and the Future." *The Philosophical Review* 79 (2): 161-180. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

Locke J. 1694. "Of Identity and Diversity," *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Reprinted in John Perry John, (1975), *Personal Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.