

compos mentis

In Defense of "I": A Defense and Revision of Psychological Continuity

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ABSTRACT

Derek Parfit presents and argues for a psychological continuity account of personal identity. This account attempts to define identity in non-circular terms, only relative to psychology and not with the body of an individual. Marya Schechtman argues against this account, claiming that it cannot escape from circularity despite attempting to resolve this problem. I propose a revision of Parfit's original claims, such that quasi-psychological connections do not need to perform the work they were meant to do, in order to address the issues presented by Schechtman's objection, and to hopefully offer a better insight into what is important to defining identity.

KEYWORDS

Personal Identity, Circularity, Memories, Psychological Continuity

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Derek Parfit presents us with what can be called a psychological-continuity account of personal identity in his aptly named essay, *Personal Identity*. This account of identity claims that when attempting to define or talk about personal identity, or rather continuous survival of an individual across time, the language of psychological continuity is useful to us as a vehicle to do so. The language of personal identity should be understood here as the words and phrases commonly used to imply identity. These include "I", "Her", and descriptions of identity as something owned individually, across time.

Parfit prefaces his account of psychological continuity by claiming that identity is a one-one relation (Parfit 1971). As I understand Parfit, a one-one relation of identity would imply that one individual can only have one identity, or rather, it is the possession of one identity by, and only by, one individual. So, for example, I am the only person who has my identity, I am *this* Chris. Further, if my identity changes, or if I have multiple identities, they cannot co-present themselves simultaneously. I will only be one person at any given time. From this claim, Parfit argues that when we speak about identity, the language we use actually is actually implicitly about psychological continuity. This is because psychological continuity as described by Parfit is the continuation of an identity, composed of identical psychological component parts, across time (Parfit 1971). So, when I describe a memory that I believe to be my own, by describing myself in reference to the past, as myself, I am describing a psychologically continuous individual. Further, so long as identity remains a one-one relation, describing it through the vehicle of psychological continuity does actually provide a criterion for identity. The criterion is as follows: 'X and Y are the same person if they are psychologically continuous and there is no person who is contemporary with either and psychologically continuous with the other'" (Parfit 1971, 13). In other words, if Person X possesses the same psychology and psyche as Person Y, at a later point in time, they are the same person, yet only insofar as no other person also shares that psyche at the same time.

Since psychological continuity now provides a criterion for identity, Parfit sets out to illustrate how psychological connections can be conceptualized impersonally, without appeal to any particularities about personal identity. A psychological connection or relation is one of the two core ideas that Parfit uses to weave his argument. It is a relation between a previous experience or state of mind someone previously possessed and the associated individual's current state

of mind. For example, the memory of having gone to Vienna in 2002, and the experience of having actually gone. The connectedness between the memory and experience forms the psychological relation in this case. Memories are important to Parfit, so much so that he thinks they are the most important connection relating to identity. However, memories are not the only psychological connection that Parfit mentions. These connections also encompass concepts such as intentions, beliefs, attitudes, etc.

However, there is a strong attack known as the circularity objection commonly employed against psychological continuity accounts of personal identity. The objection used against psychological continuity theories was originally raised by Bishop Butler. The objection is roughly this: while memory may seem like an obvious candidate which to define personal identity by, it cannot achieve this as in order to define memory, someone must already have an understanding of personal identity, as by definition memory presupposes individual personal identities. Therefore, a theorist could not explain how to differentiate between delusional and non-delusional memories without reference to identity, making any attempt to define personal identity using memory ultimately circular, and therefore inadmissible for any theory of identity. Memories are considered by Parfit to be the most important psychological connection to his account (Parfit, 1971), he must present a solution to the fatal problem this objection creates for his theory.

Parfit proposes the idea of a q-memory, or a quasi-memory as a solution to the problems created by the objection for his theory. The definition of a quasi-memory is as follows:

I am q-remembering an experience if (1) I have a belief about a past experience which seems in itself like a memory belief, (2) someone did have such an experience, and (3) my belief is dependent upon this experience in the same way (whatever that is) in which a memory of an experience is dependent upon it.
(Parfit, 1971, 15)

A *memory belief* is an individual believing that the memories they possess are in fact their own (Parfit, 1971). The central claim is that these quasi-memories offer a non-circular way to characterize memories, by replacing memory "proper" (i.e. memories as we understand them), while retaining their function as a psychological

component of identity. Therefore, quasi-memories with reference to any previous experience will actually be in reference to other quasi memories in Parfit's system, in that, there is no reference to an understanding of personal identity in the definition of the quasi-memories. If this is the case, we can now use the language of psychological continuity to describe and formulate an understanding of personal identity.

Further, Parfit argues that quasi-memories, and by extension all quasi-psychological connections, are able to distinguish between delusional and non-delusional intentions, beliefs, and memories, *without* appealing to any facts or particularities about identity.

Finally, the last important aspect of Parfit's identity theory is the idea of psychological connectedness. It is defined as "... the holding of these direct psychological relations" (Parfit 1971, 20). In order for Person X to be psychologically connected with Person Y, both individuals need to possess the same direct psychological relations as one another, across time. These concepts form the core of Parfit's psychological continuity account of personal identity.

Marya Schechtman, in her essay *Personhood and Personal Identity* (year), claims that Parfit's explanation of psychological continuity in terms of psychological "quasi-states" fails to avoid the circularity objection it was meant to address. Rather, Schechtman claims, quasi-states *cannot* avoid the circularity objection, as "... there is no way to capture what is relevant to personal identity in memories without presupposing identities" (Schechtman 1990, 79), meaning there is no way to avoid reference to particularities about whomever has the q-memory when actually remembering anything.

Schechtman's argument is that quasi-memories do not circumvent the circularity objection because they cannot distinguish between delusional and non-delusional memories in the way they are supposed to. Because, according to Schechtman, successfully distinguishing delusional from non-delusional memories is required in order that memories, or rather the quasi-memories, can be used as a basis of a psychological continuous account of identity, Parfit has not resolved the problems that the circularity objection has presented to his account. It is important to note, that while Schechtman only focuses on quasi-memories in her argument, this objection can be applied to any of the quasi-psychological connections presented by Parfit. Schechtman formulates her argument around an example memory presented by Edward Casey in his book, *Remembering*:

A Phenomenological Study. Casey's memory is seemingly simple enough, recounting an outing to the movies with his family to see a foreign film. However, upon closer inspection, an observer will begin to realize the intricacies of the relations woven into every detail in the memory. Emotions, related memories, reactions, relationships, and many other factors relating only to Casey are integral to the memory, suddenly making it impressively unclear how this quasi-memory would present itself if it is implanted into or experienced by another (Schechtman 1990). She claims that upon examination, we are left with two equally unappealing alternatives: Either, the memory will present itself as phenomenologically identical to Casey's without reference to any of his interpretations of it, or, it will present itself *exactly* as it did to Casey, with every relation and reaction that he experienced being understood as being the reactions of the other person (Schechtman 1990). The first alternative fails because, as evidenced by Casey's example, it is apparent that what constitutes a memory, qua memory, is not simply just the mental images it produces. The related associations and interpretations that it produces in the person remembering are just as critical to the memory *being the exact same memory* as the images producing them. Schechtman argues that without these associations, it seems impossible to say that an someone who experiences Casey's memory in this way would actually be sharing in the exact same memory as Casey, and goes so far as to claim that it seems unlikely that this phenomenon could even be called a memory at all, failing to capture "... what is relevant in the connection between a genuine memory and the experience remembered" (Schechtman 1990, 83). The second alternative likewise fails, however for different reasons.

Schechtman argues that while it may seem that the quasi-memory could be exactly the same as Casey's, with the same reactions and emotions associated with it, this is not actually the case. Instead, the quasi-memory would be altered by the psyche of the person who now possesses it. They would find Casey's family unfamiliar, the movie being watched peculiar, and all other associated interpretations of facts to completely alien to who they believed themselves to be. The quasi-memory takes on a completely different character to anyone who has it other than Casey, and Schechtman argues that in order to make it truly exactly the same, we would need to replace another person's psyche with Casey's. Further, if this were to occur, the memory would become non-delusional, according to Parfit's understanding, despite our knowledge that it actually is delusional. If

another person were to understand the memory as their own, there could be no way for them to distinguish from any other memory they possess, making it impossible to distinguish between the two kinds of memory.

In response to Schechtman's objection, I propose a revision of Parfit's position on the grounds that a quasi-psychological connection's ability to distinguish itself as delusional or non-delusional is irrelevant to the formation of psychologically continuous identity. As such, quasi-states would not need to operate the way Parfit had originally claimed they ought to, nullifying Schechtman's objection.

The first concept that needs to be addressed is what I will call the *Truth Relation* aspect of a quasi-psychological connection. I will use quasi-memories in my discussion of this idea; however, this relation can be applied systematically to any of the psychological relations presented and examined by Parfit and Schechtman. The truth relation of a quasi-memory encompasses its relation to the actual experience of the individual who possesses it. If a quasi-memory has a "true" relation to experience, we can say that this memory has an accurate relation to an experience that its owner actually had. This would be a non-delusional memory according to Parfit's account. For example, the "true" relation the memory of watching a documentary last night, and the experience of having actually watched the documentary. Conversely, if that quasi-memory has a "false" relation to experience, the memory does not relate to an experience the individual who possess it had. This could be a "false" relation of the memory of watching a documentary, without the experience of actually doing so, a delusional memory to Parfit. It is apparent that while Parfit and Schechtman disagree on how to distinguish between the two kinds of *q*-memories, all memories possess this relation as a component part, either as "true" or "false"; a single memory cannot possess both relations simultaneously, this would be contradictory. However, what is less apparent yet exceedingly critical to an understanding of personal identity, is that regardless of the truth or falsity of the quasi-memory, *it will still form a component part of an individual identity*. In the case of Casey's outing to the movies, if someone else had that quasi-memory implanted into their mind, I can concede that Schechtman's second scenario in her objection to Parfit is most likely to occur. The quasi-memory of an unfamiliar family seeing a strange movie together would be disturbing and confusing for its new owner. Yet, despite being delusional and not grounded in experience, this apparent memory is now a psychological relation in possession of this new owner. Whether this memory is

written off as delusion, hallucination, or accepted as their own does not matter when we consider that no matter what, it is now in their psyche.

Because of this additional insight, I propose that Parfit revise his original position about how to define psychological connectedness in his account. Recalling the initial definition of psychological connectedness, it was understood as a persistence of direct psychological connections across time. "Direct" here is to be interpreted as meaning non-delusional relations, with grounding in the actual experience of the person who possesses them. However, it is apparent that this is not actually the case, evidenced by the relationship of truth relations to identity. What I propose is that psychological connectedness not be constrained by only direct relations, but instead be understood as persistence of quasi-psychological connections across time, without regard for their being delusional or non-delusional. In other words, the need to have a way to distinguish between "true" memories and "false" ones *is not relevant* to an understanding of identity. Schechtman's circularity objection was meant to show how q-memories cannot avoid the necessary distinction of describing which individual possessed the memories when trying to distinguish between delusional and non-delusional. By removing the need to distinguish, grounded in the empirical experience of identity, q-memories can serve as a non-circular vehicle for conceptualizing identity. Further, this revision of Parfit's position works because of the nature of personal identity. It is based on belief, more specifically the individual's belief about who they are. Take for example the case of the madman who believes himself to be Napoleon. He claims to have memories, and believes they are his own, that he was actually at Waterloo leading the French forces. Despite this not actually being the case, there remains a persistence across time of identical quasi-psychological connections, direct or delusional, in the psyche of the madman. They remain foundational to his personal identity and therefore need to be accounted for in a psychological continuity account of personal identity.

However, this revision does not save Parfit's view from Schechtman's objection absolutely without further clarification. To reiterate, the modified circularity objection argued that quasi-states cannot distinguish between delusional and non-delusional memories without reference to the individual who possessed them, thus making them circular. My response, in defense of the psychological continuity view, was to revise the claims about quasi-states in relation to psychological connectedness, by eliminating the need for them to distinguish between "true"

and “false” memories. Yet, in doing so, the psychological continuity theorist is now faced with a new problem: If we redefine the scope of what quasi-memories can do, we now need a way to reliably distinguish between individuals who may possess the same q-memories. For example, suppose that I believed that I was actually my next-door neighbor. Somehow, we shared the same memories with identical attitudes, beliefs, and emotions accompanying them. Following this new proposed understanding of q-memories, they and I should be considered the exact same person at the exact same time, despite the obvious differences between us in other non-psychological elements, i.e. we live in different homes, have different families and possessions, etc. This would be absurd, as identity must be a one-one relation in order to be understood through psychological continuity. In order to resolve this, it is important to consider the nature of the objection.

Examined through the lens of psychological continuity, it seems as though it would be impossible to distinguish between myself and the neighbor. Yet, upon closer inspection I do not think this is actually the case. Looking at the case externally, it is obvious that we are not the same, given that we are different people. When referencing the madman who thought himself Napoleon for example, we call him “the madman” because we know he is not who he believes himself to be. I assume this position to be uncontroversial and will not explore it further. What is important then, is how to distinguish from an *internal* perspective. What we have explored so far is *personal* identity, how the individual distinguishes themselves from others. In this, I would argue that it would be possible to distinguish between seemingly identical persons, without regard for delusion or non-delusion. Individuals do not confuse themselves with others. An aspect of self-consciousness is an innate understanding of the self (I) being distinct and separate from other selves (them). If I believed myself to be my hypothetical neighbor, Terry, for example, then I would in this case also be Terry. Yet also, if I happen to encounter Terry out on a walk one day, despite sharing identical psychological connections, I would still comprehend myself as *this* Terry, while they are *that* Terry. Likewise, they would share a similar viewpoint. We are almost identical, save for this one dissimilarity, and this distinctness is found within the individual. In this sense, the one-one relation requirement of identity can be saved. Terry is not one person inhabiting two bodies, rather, there are two Terry’s which are internally distinct, (perhaps also externally distinct), and separate, while sharing almost all psychological qualities with one another.

As such, if this revision is made to Parfit's position, I claim that quasi-memories and all other quasi-psychological relations do not actually need to be able to distinguish between delusional and non-delusional relations. Yet, they can still operate effectively in the formation of a non-circular, impersonal account of personal identity, fulfilling the criterion Parfit had originally hoped to categorize. Therefore, this modification of the account nullifies Schechtman's objection that they cannot differentiate delusionality from true relations, the work they were originally intended to do, as there would no longer even be a need for them to do so. While this does not resolve every issue in the continuity theory, I believe it can comfortably circumvent the circularity objection originally raised against it.

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