

Personal Identity and Persistence: An Evolving Bundle of Mental and Physical Features

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ABSTRACT

The problem of personal identity contains various questions and issues, but the main issue is persistence; how can one person remain the same over time? Modern philosophers have proposed various solutions to this problem; however, none are without problems. David Hume rejected the notion of personal identity as fictitious and posited a theory that personal identity is merely a bundle of perceptions which does not remain the same over time. Hume's approach to personal identity is flawed, and Derek Parfit pushed back against Hume's complete rejection of personal identity through his argument of psychological continuity; a continuous chain of overlapping cognitive connections between beliefs, preferences, memories, and other characteristics can meet the criterion of identity. However, Parfit falls short in only acknowledging mental features as the essential property of personal identity; physical features such as age, race, sex, etc. have a significant impact on one's understanding of themselves. Through a combination of Hume's bundle theory and Parfit's psychological continuity, an understanding of what personal identity is and how it is able to remain constant over time can be reached. In this paper, I argue that personal identity is a bundle of mental *and physical* features that persists through time through psychological continuity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Who am I? Am I my name, my memories, my perceptions? While this question may seem trivial, it is important when uncovering what makes an individual who they are. Philosophers in the Modern period have argued that personal identity resides in our physical bodies or in our memories. David Hume, however, rejected the idea of personal identity as a whole and argued that personal identity is a bundle of perceptions. Contemporary philosophers took the bundle theory and argued that personal identity is a bundle of mental features. However, both positions fall short in explaining what personal identity is.

The main problem surrounding personal identity is the problem of persistence, or how a person can be the same person over time. Hume offers a compelling answer by claiming that people are never the same over time, but people act as if personal identity exists. However, Hume's approach to defining identity offers an incomplete understanding of personal identity. Derek Parfit proposes a solution to the persistence issue *via* psychological continuity, but it does not go far enough. Both Hume and Parfit lay the groundwork to understand personal identity. In this paper I propose that personal identity is a bundle of mental and physical features that persists through time through psychological continuity.

II. BACKGROUND

Who are you? Are you your name, your memories, or your perceptions? These questions concern personal identity which deals with questions that arise by virtue of being people (Olson 2022). As people grow and develop, questions about ourselves become more significant as we attempt to understand ourselves in the environments in which we live and our place in the world. However, as people develop and change over time, an issue of persistence arises; how can a person

persist from one period of time to another (Olson 2022)? Are you the same person now as you were at seven years old, or will you be the same person when you are sixty?

Before one can dive deeper into the nuances of personal identity, an understanding of identity as it applies to objects is required. Hume defines identity as “a distinct idea of an object, that remains invariable and uninterrupted thro’ a suppos’d variation of time...” (1739, 253). Identity must remain constant through a period of time. Additionally, the identity literature frequently appeals to a distinction between two kinds of properties which trace back to Aristotle: essential and accidental (Matthews 1990). Essential properties are elements of an object that are crucial to its existence *vis a vis* its identity while accidental properties are not crucial to the object’s existence (Robertson Ishii and Atkins 2020).

Imagine a chef’s knife, for example; the shape of the blade classifies the tool as a chef’s knife as opposed to a bread knife or steak knife. The size of the blade also classifies the tool as a knife as opposed to a sword. The shape and length of the blade are the essential properties of a knife which compose its identity. If either of these properties were altered, the tool’s identity as a chef’s knife would be altered.

Accidental properties, on the other hand, are elements of an object that are trivial to its identity. The materials used in the composition of the chef’s knife can be changed without changing its classification as a chef’s knife. The handle or blade can be made of wood, metal, plastic, etc.—none of these materials would change the identity of the chef’s knife. The materials would only affect the quality of the knife and its range of abilities.

II.a. Hume's Rejection of Personal Identity

Theories about personal identity during the modern period posited that personal identity resided somewhere in the mind. However, Hume saw an issue with these theories. He argued that the “variability of our perceptions are meant to show that the mind is constantly changing, hence lacking identity” (Roth, 2000, 99). Something that is constantly changing cannot be the source of an unchanging identity.¹ Instead, Hume argued that personal identity is “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement” (Hume 1738, 252). People do not perceive an object the same way over time as individual perceptions change, leaving people with only a collection of perceptions about an object at various periods of time.

Hume posits that “the identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one, and of a like kind with that which we ascribe to vegetables and animal bodies” (Hume 1738, 259). The idea of personal identity was created out of convenience as a heuristic to understand objects in an environment, despite their everchanging nature. Similar to how people classify individual perceptual instances of cats and cucumbers as ‘cats’ and ‘cucumbers’, individuals are likewise classified. For Hume, identity is a bundle of distinct perceptions which cannot be reconciled into a single perception without making them lose their distinctness (1738, 259). He argues that for people to make sense of the world, they substitute similar perceptions for an idea of continued identity. It is easier and more practical to have an idea of personal identity than to examine the

¹ The logical definition of identity is a one-to-one relationship over time, otherwise shown as: “ $x_1 = x_2$.” Hume argues that the variability of our perceptions over time means identity cannot meet the logical definition.

consequences of its nonexistence. As such, personal identity can only exist as a figure of speech, not as an existing entity.

Hume's issue surrounding discussions of the persistence of personal identity is wrapped up in issues of perception. As Abraham Roth points out, for perceptions to reveal personal identity, there must be a "retention of a preceding [perceptions]" so the imagination can associate it with the current perception (2000, 93). This would require a consciousness that persists over time which enables us to make internal connections between present and past perceptions. However, this requirement challenges Hume's two principles which he articulates in the Appendix: (1) that all our perceptions are distinct experiences and (2) the mind cannot perceive real connections between distinct experiences (Roth 200, 94). Hume argues that perceptions and experiences cannot be distinct and connected at the same time. The existence of personal identity presents an issue for Hume's philosophical system.

II.b. Psychological Continuity

Contemporary philosophers have borrowed from Hume's "bundle" explanation but altered the explanation from perceptions to psychological relations as an answer to the persistence issue. The psychological continuity view argues that the persistence of identity meets the logical criteria of identity (Olson 2022). Through this theory, mental features (beliefs, memories, preferences, capacities, etc.) are passed down through time by psychological chains, which are psychological connections a person has to their former self. So long as an individual remembers who they were when they were seven years old (or any younger age), they have a psychological chain to that former self.

Derek Parfit argued for the existence of *quasi* memories (*q*-memories), memories which are not necessarily held by the person having them. *Q*-memories function like regular memories, however, the difference is that another person holds a memory about who you *were* at any given point. A person may have a memory about their childhood at the age of five years old but cannot remember anything before then. However, they can have a *q*-memory about their life when they were younger than five because their family holds original memories of who they were and discloses that memory to them.² Through this *q*-memory, a person can have a psychological connection to who they were as a child.

Q-memories can connect someone to their past self. However, Parfit argues that the psychological connection to our past self is stronger if there is a connection to the mental features. An artist in her thirties has a closer psychological connection to her past self at eighteen when she began to establish her beliefs than she is to her past self at age five where she held different beliefs.

III. ACCOUNTS OF IDENTITY OVER TIME

Parfit's and Hume's understandings of personal identity provide insight into the nature of personal identity. Personal identity cannot meet the logical definition of identity as Hume shows us, but personal identity is not merely a bundle of perceptions. Likewise, I will show that personal identity is a bundle, but not just a bundle of mental features but physical features (age, gender, race, etc.) as well. Personal identity does not exist as a single element, as there is not a singular

² *Q*-memories must meet one of three criteria: (1) the person having the *q*-memory must hold a belief about a the past experience which seems in itself like a memory, (2) someone external to the person having the *q*-memory did have the experience, or (3) the person's belief about the *q*-memory is dependent on the experience the same way in which a memory of an experience is dependent on the person's belief (Parfit 1971, 15).

essential property to a person. Rather, personal identity exists implicitly through minor essential properties which together compose a person's major essential properties, or personal identity.

III.a. A Static Account of Identity

Identity is a one-to-one relation that persists through time, which Hume recognized as the logical definition of identity. However, this definition of identity can only be applied to static objects, that is objects which do not naturally change and develop. People are not static objects, they are dynamic; people grow and develop from new experiences and thoughts. Recall the chef's knife. Hume's definition of identity suffices for the chef's knife which is a static object and does not naturally change or develop. The shape and length of the blade will persist until an external object forces it to change:

$$x_1 = x_2 = x_3 = x_4 = \dots x_n$$

The chef's knife (x) at time 1 will remain the same at 2 and time 3 until it ceases to exist or its essential property is altered. People will not remain the same from time 1 to time 2 as they will have new experiences, thoughts, beliefs, etc. which changes a person at time 1 to a person at time 2. Although they are both relatively the same person, new properties have been added making the person slightly different. Under the logical definition of identity (which I will now refer to as the *static account of identity*) people cannot remain the same across time, suggesting that personal identity is a fiction. However, this account is not a sufficient explanation for objects which naturally grow or develop, requiring another account of identity to explain these objects.

III.b. A Dynamic Account of Identity

Rather than relying on a definition of identity which evaluates static objects, personal identity ought to be evaluated through a definition for dynamic objects. Where Hume's definition of identity requires $x_1 = x_2$, a dynamic consideration would propose that:

$$x_1 \approx x_2 \approx x_3 \approx x_4 \approx \dots \approx x_n$$

The approximation allows for an object to be relatively the same across time. A person (x) at time 1 can still be considered relatively the same person at time 2 if the changes which occurred between time 1 and 2 are marginal, not significant.³ Significant changes would result in x_1 not being equal to x_2 . Identity is still a one-to-one relation which persists through time under the dynamic account. Objects which naturally develop are able to have a consistent identity under this account. With this account, dynamic objects can change and remain relatively the same; however, after enough marginal changes the object will assume a new identity until the marginal changes compound into a new identity, and so on and so forth.

IV. PERSONAL IDENTITY IS AN EVOLVING BUNDLE

With the dynamic account of identity, we can begin to examine how personal identity can exist. People are dynamic objects; they change and develop naturally over time. Hume demonstrates that personal identity cannot be a single element in the mind as it is always changing in a static account of identity; however, in a dynamic account of identity, personal identity can exist through psychological continuity. Memories and q -memories, which are memories one has of themselves

³ When discussing significance, I am using it to describe changes in an individual's life that has a large impact on an individual's understanding of themselves or their surroundings. Marginal changes are changes that occur, but do not alter one's understanding of themselves or their surroundings.

via others' testimony, create a psychological connection to the past which continues to grow with time. Personal identity exists as a bundle of mental *and physical* features which persists through psychological continuity.

The psychological continuity view of personal identity argues that *only* mental features compose personal identity, and its unique combination allows people to grow and develop with their mental features. However, physical features such as race, gender, age, ability, etc. all have significant impacts on a person's existence. Someone who is hearing impaired will have different memories and experiences than people who are not hearing impaired. Likewise, Latinos, Asians, Africans, and Europeans all have different life experiences due to how race impacts one's understanding of themselves and how others choose to interact with other races. Physical features matter as well as the mental features in forming one's identity.

Both physical (p) and mental features (m) are encompassed within the bundle (p, m) which suffices for a person's personal identity, or major essential properties (E). These essential properties, however, are composed of various minor essential properties (e) with various levels of significance (s). People place various levels of significance on different minor essential properties with regard to how important they are in defining them ($E_{p,m} = e_1 \times s_1 + e_2 \times s_2 + \dots + e_n \times s_n$).⁴ Personal identity would be determined by the major essential properties of mental and physical features ($PI = E_p + E_m$). For example, the artist may understand her gender, memories,

⁴ By demonstrating personal identity as an equation, I am not suggesting that personal identity can be calculated or quantified. Formatting the argument as an equation allows for a theoretical understanding of $E_{p,m}$ and e in determining an individual's personal identity.

passion, and beliefs to be the most significant factors in shaping who she is as a person, whereas age is not. Her personal identity can be displayed as:

$$PI = [e_{gender}(0.8) + e_{age}(0.06) + \dots] + [e_{passion}(0.4) + e_{beliefs}(0.3) + e_{memories}(0.2) + \dots]$$

The physical and mental minor essential properties which the artist recognizes as significant factors in the shaping of her personal identity are unique to her.

Personal identity is not a single element that remains constant throughout a person's life. It is a complex bundle of various elements which vary from person to person. The issue of the persistence of one's identity remains: how can a person change and develop, yet be the same?

IV.a. The Persistence of Personal Identity

Q-memories and psychological continuity allow for people to remain relatively the same over time. The dynamic account of personal identity shows that marginal changes to a person will not drastically change who they are. If the artist's passions strengthen marginally (from 0.4 to 0.401), it would be absurd to say that she is a completely new person. When changes to minor essential properties are marginal, the artist is relatively the same person.

It would be a mistake to argue that marginal changes over time do not make a difference. If the artist's passions continued to grow, we cannot say she will be the same person in the long run. Given enough time, marginal changes compound resulting in a new personal identity. Over the course of one's lifetime, they will define and redefine themselves multiple times, each building on the last. *Q*-memories and memories creates a psychological connection from the past identities to the current identity. This continuous psychological chain creates a narrative of one's life. This narrative, constructed by various *q*-memory and memory chains, keeps track of past identities, and shows the development of a person through different points in time.

V. CONCLUSION

People are not static objects; they grow and develop naturally over the course of their existence. As such, a static understanding of identity cannot be applied to them. Hume and Parfit both progressed the discourse surrounding personal identity, contributing the bundle theory and the theory of psychological continuity; both theories combined provide an explanation for what personal identity is and how it can persist over time. Personal identity is comprised of two major essential properties, mental and physical features which are in turn comprised of minor essential properties with various levels of significance. Marginal changes in minor essential properties alter the individual, but not enough to consider the individual a new person. Over time, marginal changes compound and result in a change in an individual's personal identity. *Q*-memories and memories create psychological connections to our past identities. One can make sense of our continual growth through a narrative of one's life which encompasses previous instances of personal identity.

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