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Slippin' Identity¹

Kristina Šekrst

“I know you! I know what you are. People don't change. You're Slippin' Jimmy.”

--Charles Lindbergh McGill, Jr. to James McGill, “Pimento”

Instead of saying “You’re a liar. A conman. A dishonest man. A cheater.”, it was enough for Chuck just to state that he was “Slippin’ Jimmy”. All of the character traits that make Slippin’ Jimmy a Slippin’ Jimmy are already present in the name. “Saul Goodman” refers to a different person than “James McGill”. The former is a quick-witted and somewhat sleazy lawyer, while James McGill is an underdog living in the shadow of his more successful brother and colleagues. Gene Takavic is a quiet and emotionally broken shopping-mall manager, while Viktor Saint Claire is a fictitious wealthy man drinking expensive tequilas and thinking about becoming even richer. They all seem like different characters even though they are all, in fact, the same human being. However, they seem like different people since not only the alias changes, but the main character traits as well. In order to understand what’s going on here, it’s worth revisiting the notion of identity to get a glimpse of what we can get from it.

What is it like to be Jimmy?

In countries that allow such practice, it’s not unusual for patients with dementia to request euthanasia. One peculiar case involved a 74-year-old woman signing a written declaration stating

¹ TBP in *Better Call Saul and Philosophy*, ed. by Joshua Heter & Brett Coppenger, Carus Books, 2022.

she wanted to be euthanized at the moment her demented state took over her life. However, when the time came, she started fighting for her life. It was as if a different person had signed the former consent and the new person was incapable of reaffirming it. So, what does being the person that one is consist of? The problem of personal identity tries to answer questions such as: *who is Jimmy? What are the things that make Jimmy the person he is? What is it to be a person? What does it take for a person to exist from one point to another?* If Jimmy is just his body, then the introductory case might seem simple: we're dealing with the same person. Saul Goodman is the same person as James McGill, Slippin' Jimmy, Viktor Saint Claire and Gene Takavic. And even Bob Odenkirk!

Yet this somehow doesn't feel right. A more intuitive notion is that personal identity has more to do with someone's mind as opposed to their body. The idea here is that personal identity requires some kind of *psychological continuity*. Psychological continuity refers to a kind of autobiographical memory. Jimmy remembers himself being himself yesterday or even years and decades ago, having the same beliefs, views, desires, intuitions, and personality traits. If Jimmy would equate his identity with his consciousness only, it would seem as if he was losing his identity every time he went to sleep. But what does not change? Jimmy's inner mental world in general. It's an intuitive position in which your thoughts, desires, fears and character are what makes a person exactly that person. Jimmy can lose his hair or change his appearance, we would still feel as nothing has changed about who Jimmy really is.

Seems good, everything we need is just some old-fashioned psychological continuity! However, if we take a closer look at psychological continuity, a number of examples come to mind that raise the question of the type and amount of psychological continuity needed to ground personal identity. We have mentioned that all of us lose consciousness for at least a couple of

hours per day. We just don't consider sleeping to be a kind of a break in our psychological continuity ("I need at least 8 hours of psychological discontinuity" doesn't seem to be a valid excuse to be late for work, but I encourage the reader to try out his luck.). One might argue that a longer or different type of break in psychological continuity is needed to lose personal identity. However, if Jimmy slips into a coma that might take weeks, months, or even years, is he really that different when he wakes up? Is Hector Salamanca still Hector Salamanca after waking up from a coma? I wouldn't dare to ask him that. If we were to wake up from a coma, most of us would probably claim we were still the same person. Intuitively, unconscious moments somehow don't seem to count, but again they do if they're a different type of (un)consciousness, such as in the case of Alzheimer's disease, dementia, or various psychological illnesses. However, we don't have to think about rare events such as comas or diseases, all of us have lost the memories and beliefs we had in the first couple of years of our lives, and yet continued to consider those kids as us. So, it doesn't seem that psychological continuity is what grounds personal identity, or at least the sole thing responsible for it.

Physical Self

If Jimmy's psychological continuity is not enough to ground his identity, maybe there's something worth checking out regarding his physical continuity. Such a stance is often called the *brute-physical view*. Similar to psychological continuity, we can talk about *bodily continuity*: a way to state that there is a threshold limiting how much of our body stays the same so that we're still considered the same person. It seems easy to attack such a position, even a graduate of the University of American Samoa could do it. No one would deny a person their identity if the

human being in question is missing some organs or limbs. Again, there might be a threshold (in the words of Monty Python, “it’s just a flesh wound!”), similar to psychological continuity.

However, even though the technology is currently not as developed, we might propose a thought experiment involving a brain transplant. If Jimmy’s brain was transplanted into another body, most of us would intuitively feel that the old body didn’t matter anymore. There might be another issue at stake as well that might turn the tables. Suppose Jimmy had cancer spreading through his brain, which could be resolved by replacing it with a donated one. If such a procedure were possible, it might provide him with new memories and traits. If that happened, our intuition would again feel as if some point of identity has been broken. On the other hand, if Jimmy’s mental states, desires, beliefs, and personality did somehow stay the same, this would feel as if Jimmy had gotten a lung transplant: he would still feel like Jimmy, the same way Walter White would still feel like Walter White after a lung transplant. So, it appears that Jimmy’s mind does seem to matter a great deal in regard to his identity after all.

Once Upon a Time

Perhaps the notion of personal identity then consists of a combination of both psychological and bodily continuity, and both sides of the coin might influence the other. Consider the case of Phineas Gage, an American railroad foreman who survived an accident in which an iron rod was driven through his head, which destroyed his left frontal lobe. After long and exhaustive treatment, he was left blind in his left eye and retained some facial weakness, but no obvious neurological deficits. Had the story ended here, it would have been another example of a medical triumph. However, it seems that the injury had significant consequences on both his behavior and personality. His friends were stating that he was “no longer Gage”. Compare this to the episode

“Blood Money” of *Breaking Bad* when Hank told Walter White: “I don't know who you are. I don't even know who I'm talking to”, being shocked to discover that fundamental character traits he thought Walter possessed are now different. One might even argue that Walter's tumor was changing his behavior.

One way of trying to tackle the question of personal identity is to abandon the mind-body problems altogether. Maybe some portions of our minds are important, maybe some aspect of our bodily continuity weighs in as well. *Narrativism* is the view that states that we persist from one moment to another as the same person—having the same personal identity—because we're able to tell the same story about ourselves. Jimmy doesn't have to be Homer and write an epic about his life, but he would have a general idea of what sort of a human being he is in some fundamental sense. He would tell the same story about his half-an-hour-ago self as he would now. But he probably wouldn't do it for his fetal phase, early childhood, or maybe even himself from years or months ago.

Imagine Jimmy on a first date with Kim. She would ask him to tell her about herself. You have some, coherent or not, idea about who you are, what your beliefs, desires, attitudes, or traits are. That's the narrativist account. Sometimes it's not accurate, but even a lie might be a part of who Jimmy really is and how other people see him if he presents himself like that.

One intuitive motivation for narrativism is the fact that sometimes other people help us identify some parts of our lives. People are going to tell you how you acted when you were a kid, even if you don't remember it now. So, it's not only Jimmy who's telling his life story, it might also be others. But he is still the guy who is telling what to accept and what not. Somebody might tell you you did some nasty stuff while drunk, and you might deny such a narrative because that *just isn't you*.

That said, consider the 74-year-old dementia patient mentioned previously. She wouldn't tell the same story as her former self had. And the whole *Better Call Saul* series, along with *Breaking Bad* as well, is illustrating how a person's identity changes with different circumstances. Walter White from the beginning of *Breaking Bad* doesn't seem to us like the same person as Heisenberg from the final episode, and we're bound to see Jimmy McGill become Saul Goodman and slip into a new personal identity. But there are other character developments we might see as identity changes from different perspectives. Charles McGill, suffering from an apparent psychological disorder, is not fully considered the same person he was by his former peers, even though he is treated the same by his brother Jimmy.

Slippin' Jimmy

Let's presume the nature of personal identity has something to do with the story one tells about himself. The story Jimmy is telling is actually *constituting his identity*—it's who he really is. This doesn't mean he can start telling everybody that he's the world's best lawyer, it will probably only constitute his identity as a liar. Even though he doesn't feel like the same person he was when he was two years old, he will still tell his life story including those years. It might seem wrong to include something he doesn't remember as a part of his identity. Narratives, of course, don't arise out of thin air, and he's not the only participant in the story, even though he's at its center. Parental reminiscence and other people's stories still constitute a big portion of a person's identity. Remember the time you were hearing about all the things you did when you were really drunk? You still may have done some embarrassing things, and not remembering

them doesn't excuse you from the possible repercussions on your identity. I know, philosophy is dangerous.

However, this isn't the only story that should be considered Chuck's mistake lies in the fact that he thinks that only one story forms the complete Jimmy McGill's identity: that of Slippin' Jimmy. In his past, Jimmy did stage slip and fall accidents to make quick cash. But in "Slip", Jimmy is claiming that Slippin Jimmy' is "back in Cicero, dead and buried". In "Wiederssehen", there's a heartbreaking scene between Jimmy and Kim: "You look at me and you see Slippin' Jimmy", says disheartened Jimmy, once more rejecting his former identity. A past Jimmy is being *Jimmy* if he has narratives supporting such a connection. He's the narrator and the protagonist, and he's the one to decide what he takes to be his own life. That way, Jimmy can consider Slippin' Jimmy to be a past part of him, but not feel it's constituting his identity right now.

In the narrative process, one might be self-delusional or say one thing and do another. For example, Jimmy might claim he never lies. We know that this is not the case. Jimmy also might try the fake it till you make it tactic. He might start telling people he's not afraid of anything, even though he is. It would still be a part of his narrative and a part of his personality. But can we require accuracy? We aren't perfect computers remembering every little thing in detail, nor do we constantly act according to some predefined principles. Jimmy's narrative might even describe events that never happened: sometimes, a hidden trauma or a story one made up can be a huge part of one's identity. Okay, then Jimmy might still claim he was Shakespeare, right? He could also state that he was an honorable man, and such a description would constitute his story. But the others are here to believe it or not.

It seems that pure narrativism wouldn't work without adding a certain kind of a reality constraint: Jimmy's life story doesn't have to be entirely true or perfect, but his memories need to be *grounded in reality*, at least in principle. Jimmy may give up on certain aspects of himself or try to act like a different person. If we didn't allow that, then turning a new leaf would be impossible. Or even realizing one liked tomatoes or cigarettes after all. Producing a narrative is understood *dispositionally*: Jimmy doesn't need to recite thousands of pages of his life story (even though we all, unfortunately, know a person who does that), but in certain circumstances, he might. He doesn't need to tell everything about James McGill, the lawyer, but he might if asked.

Saul Goodman

In *Breaking Bad*, we were only seeing the Saul side of James McGill. In such circumstances, that really was his identity. It was a story we as the audience lead to believe, but now we have different narratives to choose from. James McGill has presented his alter ego Saul Goodman to the world as “the last line of defense for the little guy”, “a righter of wrongs”, a “friend to the friendless”. Since he's the protagonist of the story, such a description seems ultimately identity-constituting. But is James McGill really Saul Goodman, just by sharing the same physical body and psychological continuity? We have seen various objections to arguments considering psychological or physical continuity. Or is it like the case of a person believing he was Shakespeare? If narrativism is such a necessary prerequisite of our identity, then any continuity break would end our existence. Imagine that, no need for suicide, Jimmy just needs to stop telling his story and bang, he's done. Do remember that one's constituting narrative is only a

disposition: he doesn't need to actually recite it, but he has to have the ability to do so in some way.

However, this again raises the problems of psychological continuity as a marker for identity. If one is suffering from dementia, his life story is now different, or maybe even completely lost. Some people have argued that Chuck McGill is suffering from early-onset dementia. From a narrativist standpoint, the former Chuck McGill is gone, because it seems that he no longer possesses the disposition to tell the *real* story of Chuck McGill he once was. If mental trauma isn't widespread, Chuck might have "good days" in which he remembers it, but if not, then the breaking of the narrative really constitutes a new life story, a new person, and a new identity to converse with. In real life, old habits may always creep back. Chuck can give up on some narratives, but then they might come back. But he will always have *a* narrative to tell, there's no way to escape it. Chuck might end up as a different person, willingly or not.

Narrativists often emphasize that our narratives are prone to revision. Our memory isn't perfect, our life choices change. In "Quite a Ride", Jimmy proclaims: "I'm gonna be a damn good lawyer. And people are gonna know about it." And we really, really want to believe that. However, we have mentioned that often Jimmy's auto-biographical point of view isn't enough. First, it has to be somewhat grounded in reality. Second, Jimmy might not have been aware of some important or less important moments in your life. None of us was aware of the most important moment of our life—our birth. However, if the society is influencing Jimmy's narrative, can we safely state that James McGill *is* Slippin' Jimmy, and that would constitute his identity? Now we go back to the criterion of being grounded in reality. This is where we as the audience need to decide whether James McGill acting like the best lawyer ever is grounded in

reality or is Slippin' Jimmy often taking over. We might even say that Chuck's identity is also at stake because of his seemingly psychological fear of electricity.

Gene Takavic

In flash-forward sequences at the beginning of each season, James McGill, now under yet another alias Gene Takavic, works behind the counter in a store called Cinnabon. Winding down after work, we see Gene watching an old VHS tape of Saul Goodman's TV commercials from his former life. Gene begins to cry. James McGill was disowning his Slippin' Jimmy identity, but it seems that he was really trying, and maybe even—to his standards—succeeding, to be the best lawyer ever. In "Switch", he carves the initials SG into a wall. It seems that James McGill is genuinely identifying with his Saul Goodman persona.

Consider again the question of *persistence*. Does Saul Goodman *exist* anymore? Jimmy, wanted by the police, apparently can't narrate his Saul Goodman story anymore. Other people can, but the auto-biographical part is missing, even though it's dying to come out. Perhaps we could survive without narrative continuity, maybe it's possible that Saul Goodman is still "alive". It seems wrong to think that one moment, narrative continuity matters, and suddenly it doesn't. Therefore, we need to weaken our claim: it might not be *necessary* for us to persist from one point to another, but it might be *sufficient*. It's not enough for Jimmy to just kick the ball while playing soccer to score a goal, but it's a necessary step, he can't use a cannon, according to the rules of the game. But for it to be sufficient (enough), it needs to pass over the goal line and include the necessary conditions.

Jimmy doesn't need to remember his early childhood to consider it a part of his identity, and he did survive without narrative continuity, the same way Saul Goodman doesn't need narrative continuity to make a comeback as Jimmy's (perhaps *true*) identity. But if Jimmy compares himself from a current standpoint to himself at some point in the past, he might establish a new narrative continuity, the same way Gene can recall his former Saul Goodman self by remembering the person he once was and reidentifying as such. Of course, this doesn't tell us when exactly an identity was created. This seems like an easy way out, Jimmy can just establish a narrative continuity whenever he wants to. How convenient

There isn't an easy way out or a right way to answer the persistence question, and it seems that the most satisfying answer lies in the combination of all the mentioned criteria. But the notion of persistence isn't the only relevant question in this argument. The *characterization question* asks what makes us the people we are, what are our beliefs, desires, wishes, preferences, and similar mental states. Narratives are presented as an adequate answer. Even if we might not be sure when Jimmy persists from one point in time to another, we can argue that Jimmy's narrative is pinpointing at least the *necessary* conditions of what it is like to be Jimmy. If Jimmy is having an identity crisis, then he's not sure of the very fundamentals of his identity and whether they're necessary, sufficient, or neither. However, it seems intuitive that other people can't tell him what his *fundamental* character traits are since their narrative isn't as important as his regarding *his* life story. His is necessary, theirs *might* be sufficient. And being Slippin' Jimmy or Saul Goodman presupposes different necessary characteristic properties. Chuck or Kim can accuse Jimmy of being Slippin' Jimmy, but if he identifies his most fundamental character traits to be those of Saul Goodman, nobody can take that away from him, maybe not even himself.

James McGill

So, who is James McGill? A little bit of everything, and it depends on the point of time we're observing. He really was Slippin' Jimmy and Saul Goodman at different points in his life. He's superficially Gene Takavic, but this doesn't bear any identity-altering changes except for the silly mustache.

Narrativism explains how different identities can be distinguished even if we're seemingly dealing with the same body (and therefore presupposing the same mind). The only thing that matters is that Jimmy is able to tell a new story about who he really is. Starting a new chapter is taken literally, as a way of reaffirming or abandoning your former identity. Sometimes other people contribute to his story, and sometimes not. Sometimes it's not easy to tell when or where an identity shift took place. But James McGill can transform into Saul Goodman or back into Slippin' Jimmy, not in a weird werewolf way, but as a change of heart and mind great enough for himself and other people to consider him a different person. When such a shift happens, the person formerly known as James is now telling a new story about who he really is. And we're here to listen. In the words of a wise scholar, Lalo Salamanca, "Tell me again. I just want to hear the story".