

I am Me not Someone Else: A Philosophical Outlook into Personal Identity

By: Renella Jane F. Rubio

I am Me and not someone else. This might just be a spur of the moment type of statement; however, it weighs more than it seems. Moreover, it delves into an individual's understanding of the self-amidst different factors revolving one's identity.

Personal identity can be deemed as a puzzle of distinct characteristics, experiences, understanding, and values in which when put together define who a person is. It involves different aspects in life such as self-perception, cultural background, beliefs, traditions, and even societal roles, which contribute bit by bit on how individuals view themselves and are perceived by others. Identity and sameness over time are related to one another. Understanding sameness over time—how a person remains essentially “the same” amidst changes in physical appearance, experiences and, or beliefs—remains significant as it helps maintain a rational sense of the self. The continuity of the interplay of changes in different aspects of an individual's self is essential in fostering self-awareness, personal growth, and formation of stable relationship among others. This also underpins moral and legal accountability to ensure that individuals are treated as themselves throughout time.

What constitutes the “self” that remains the same person over time, despite changes in experiences, physical form, and beliefs? This paper aims to explore major theories of identity and argue for the most coherent view or propose an integrated approach.

II. Theories of Personal Identity

It may seem easy to define personal identity through dictionary meaning or through the internet, but that alone is not enough to fully grasp the concept. Personal identity can be defined on a deeper level based on different theories which have been introduced by different philosophers over time.

One theory on personal identity is the psychological continuity theory. This theory puts emphasis on the continuous connection of an individual's psychological states, such as memories, beliefs, desires and personality traits which are present in different points of their life as the core of personal identity. This narrows down to the idea that for as long as the connection between these psychological states is consistent, then individual “X” is the same person despite changes and development over time. This theory also suggests that an individual's current beliefs and desires are influenced by past experiences and intentions.

This theory is often associated with Derek Parfit, (insert what type of philosopher) who argued that although personal identity might not be strictly defined, the concept of psychological continuity is crucial for understanding oneself over time.

Similarly, John Locke's theory that memory and psychological continuity are essential for personal identity, provides another view of the psychological continuity theory. He emphasizes the role of memory, consciousness, and psychological continuity as the foundation of personal

identity. For Locke, an individual remains the same over time if their current consciousness is connected to the past consciousness through memory. This theory also covers other psychological features that contribute to personal identity. This involves personality traits, intentions and desires and other psychological features. Personality traits contribute to the sense of continuity in ways such as when memory fails, consistent traits may serve as markers of identity which I find somehow connected to the phrase “The mind forgets but the heart remembers”.

A person’s goals, aspirations, and intentions may also define their identity. For example, if someone’s memories fade but they retain their ambitions and moral framework, these aspects may still provide a basis for personal identity. How a person reacts to specific stimuli, the way they think, reason, and solve problems and the stories they tell themselves to make sense of their lives when combined with memory form a broader psychological picture of personal identity.

However, this approach to personal identity faces several challenges and objections. What would happen if a person lost all memories of their past as in the case of amnesia, are they still the same person? Locke might argue that their identity is disrupted, but this conclusion seems counterintuitive when considering their continued biological existence. Memory is not as reliable as always. Individuals can have conflicting or false memories of that point to the same event. This then creates ambiguity about which memories are valid for establishing personal identity.

Another theory which contributes to personal identity is the physical continuity theory. This theory emphasizes the physical body as the primary determinant of personal identity rather than psychological states. This theory argues that it is the continuous existence of an individual’s physical body that makes such person the same over time. For as long as the same physical body or brain persists or functions, so does the same person, regardless of the changes that occur in their psychological aspects. Personal identity persists because the same physical body, more specifically the brain, continues to exist through time. This theory is challenged by different critics on the grounds that this theory cannot fully account for situations such as when an individual happens to suffer from severe brain and physical damage or significant mental state changes despite the physical body remaining the same.

Similar to the Physical Continuity Theory, the Brain-Based Theory argues that personal identity is grounded on the physical continuity of the brain, more specifically in the structures responsible for memory, personality and consciousness. This theory emphasizes the brain, as a locus of what makes a person unique and provides the material basis for persistence over time. Personal identity is tied to the uninterrupted existence of the brain, more so the neural structures responsible for long term storage of experiences, traits, and consciousness.

However, this theory is in contrast with the psychological approaches to personal identity as it focuses mainly with one organ which is the brain while the psychological approaches focus on the mental continuity of an individual regardless of the physical or bodily attributes. But what would happen if in cases where severe brain injury, neurological diseases (e.g., Alzheimer’s Disease) or even brain tumors which affect the individual. If a person loses their memories or fundamental personality traits due to brain damage, are they still the same person? Advocates for this theory would argue that physical continuity of the brain persists despite psychological

changes, but then this would raise questions as to whether identity is linked closely to memory and personality.

Another case where this theory is challenged is in the cases of Split-Brain Syndrome. The Split-Brain Syndrome is a condition which arises from the corpus callosum, the bundle of nerves connecting the two hemispheres is being partially or completely severed, leading to two semi-independent centers of consciousness. With this syndrome, the individual may have different perceptions of things around and may result to different distinct identities. This challenges the continuity of identity as both hemispheres have physical continuity but may function as separate agents, challenging the singular continuous identity of a person. This theory offers compelling explanation for identity based on the material continuity of the brain, however, it faces significant challenges in explaining identity in cases where the brain continuity is disrupted by either external or internal factors.

These challenges raise deeper questions about whether identity is strictly physical or also involves psychological, functional, or even relational factors. Some philosophers advocate for hybrid theories or question whether personal identity can be fully captured by any single framework.

Another theory linked to personal identity is the Narrative Identity Theory. This theory suggests that an individual's personal identity is akin to a self-narrative or story that we construct ourselves by actively interpreting and integrating past experiences, present perceptions and future aspirations into one coherent narrative which provides a sense of purpose in an individual's life. This theory essentially boils down to "who you are" is shaped by the story you tell yourself about your life. The narrative identity theory resonates with existential and constructivist perspectives, suggesting that identity is not discovered but actively created. In this theory, storytelling becomes a core mechanism. An individual makes sense of his or her life by weaving experiences into a narrative following the elements of a traditional story however this narrative has an evolving nature, which means that as the individual encounters new experiences, changes can occur. People actively revise their stories to make sense of change and maintain a coherent sense of identity. Cultural and social influences also play significant roles in affirming or challenging the different aspects of the constructed self-narrative.

Life circumstances, changes in self-perception, identity challenges impact the continuity of personal identity with regards to personal identity. A person might reinterpret past failures as stepping stones after achieving success, altering the meaning of earlier experiences within their narrative. Someone who once identified as a "victim" of circumstances may reconstruct their narrative to emphasize resilience and agency. In response, individuals may rely on external cues (photos, journals, or others' accounts) to sustain their sense of self.

However, this theory poses potential objections. One objection is if a person's narrative is inconsistent or contradictory to the previously known narrative, does this undermine their identity? Philosophers who support this theory argue that some inconsistency is natural and necessary for growth as long as the person's narrative is coherent. If a person chooses to radically change their self-narrative, for example by redefining core aspects, does this then suggest that they become a completely different person? Advocates might say that identity persists in the continuity

of the act of narrating, even if the content of the story changes dramatically. Self-narratives are often constrained by cultural norms and societal expectations, potentially limiting autonomy in constructing identity. Lastly, in the case of people who may lack a clear or reflective narrative due to underlying mental health conditions or different cognitive styles. Does this imply that they lack identity?

III. Analysis of Key Issues in Personal Identity

The philosophical paradox of identity over time poses an intriguing question: *How can someone remain fundamentally the same while undergoing significant changes?* This problem is particularly relevant to questions of personal identity, objects, and entities that evolve or transform over time. One of the most enduring examples used to illustrate this paradox is the *Ship of Theseus*. The Ship of Theseus paradox is a classic thought experiment which raises questions about identity, change and continuity. In this ancient thought experiment, a ship belonging to the hero Theseus is preserved in a museum. Over time, as its wooden planks decay, they are replaced one by one with new planks until eventually, none of the original planks remain. This is when the questions arise: Is it still the same ship? Or is it a completely different entity? This puzzle deepens when we consider a hypothetical second scenario: Suppose all the original planks were gathered and reassembled into a ship. Which ship, if either, is the true Ship of Theseus—the one gradually replaced or the one made of the original parts?

The Ship of Theseus provides a striking analogy for personal identity. Over a lifetime, individuals undergo continuous physical, psychological, and experiential changes. From the cellular level, where old cells die and new ones form, to shifts in beliefs, memories, and personality, nearly every aspect of a person transforms. Yet, we often consider individuals to remain fundamentally "the same" throughout their lives. The problem of change and sameness invites us to rethink what it means to be the "same" over time. By considering examples like the Ship of Theseus alongside our own lives, we can explore how identity persists—or doesn't—in the face of transformation.

Memory plays an important role in our understanding of personal identity, more specifically as emphasized in the psychological continuity theory. As stated above, an individual's identity can persist over time through a chain of memories, experiences and psychological states. However, the reliability of the theory's framework is challenged by factors such as having disrupted memory brought about by mental conditions such as amnesia and Alzheimer's disease.

In cases of amnesia, individuals may lose partial or complete recollection of their past experiences, including critical aspects of their personal identity. Similarly, Alzheimer's disease progressively erodes memory and cognitive functioning, often leaving loved ones questioning whether the affected individual remains the same person. If memory serves as the backbone of personal identity, does losing significant portions of memory mean the person ceases to exist as their prior self? Even in individuals without amnesia, memories are not always reliable. If identity depends on memories, to what extent can it be trusted?

Memory disruptions, such as those caused by amnesia or Alzheimer's, expose the limitations of psychological continuity theories. They force us to reconsider the nature of identity

and its implications for moral, legal, and ethical responsibilities. These challenges highlight the need for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of what it means to remain "the same person" over time.

Moral responsibility is closely tied to the concept of personal identity. If identity is the foundation for accountability, questions arise about whether shifting identities—due to psychological, physical, or experiential changes—alter one's responsibility for past actions. Moral identity presumes a continuity with identity, more so in the ethical and legal aspects of life. Take for example a person who has committed an act is the one being held accountable. This case takes a turn as the theories revolving around personal identity come into play. From a biological perspective, a person may retain the same body even as their mind or personality changes. In this sense, the responsibility of the person towards his/her actions remain constant regardless of changes in mental conditions. From the view point of the psychological continuity, significant changes in a person's memory, values, intentions and experience disrupts the link between their past and present selves. From the narrative continuity view, the theory suggests that the moral responsibility may depend as to whether or not the individual recognizes and to the extent incorporate their past actions into their current life narrative.

Delving more on moral responsibility, in terms of legal cases, it becomes a dilemma when a defendant for an act claims that he/she was not in the "right mind" during the time the act was committed. Biologically and physically, the person can be held accountable, however psychological transformations can complicate in concluding the case. A defendant with retrograde amnesia may lack memory of committing a crime but still be held legally responsible because their physical identity remains constant. Moral responsibility is deeply intertwined with personal identity, but shifting identities complicate traditional frameworks of accountability. By exploring cases of profound change, we can develop more inclusive ethical and legal approaches that balance justice with an understanding of personal transformation.

Hybrid theories of personal identity aim to address the limitations of single-framework models by combining elements from various perspectives, such as psychological, narrative, and biological theories. These approaches attempt to provide a more comprehensive understanding of identity, particularly in complex and practical scenarios. One model is the psychological and narrative hybrid which combines the emphasizing memory, consciousness, and mental states with the focus on how individuals construct and interpret their life stories. In this model, a person maintains a cohesive sense of personal identity through connected memories and integrating such into a self-narrative despite some memories being lost or altered.

Hybrid theories of personal identity provide a holistic perspective by capturing the complexity of identity more effectively than the single-focus theories. Such theories also provide practical application by addressing real-world situations, more importantly in legal responsibility, medical setting and moral accountability with greater nuance. This also provides dynamic adaptability by being able to accommodate changes overtime, highlighting that identity evolves as time progresses.

Although the hybrid theories possess a commendable set of strengths, there are still underlying weaknesses. Hybrid theories may lead to a more complex concept which makes it harder to define

and apply consistently especially in terms abstract debated on personal identity. Different viewpoints on personal identity may lead to contradictory conclusions and may struggle to offer a more precise answer in edge cases such as when a person involved happens to have on set dementia, where narrative and psychological continuity are disrupted.

The exploration of personal identity over time reveals it to be a dynamic and multifaceted concept. From the paradox of change and sameness, as illustrated by the Ship of Theseus, to the critical role of memory in psychological continuity, we see how identity intertwines with elements of physical, psychological, and narrative continuity. Hybrid theories offer a more inclusive framework, combining these dimensions to address challenges posed by disrupted memory, profound transformations, and shifting self-conceptions. These approaches prove particularly valuable in addressing practical cases involving legal responsibility, ethical dilemmas, and therapeutic contexts.

Understanding identity's fluid nature has profound implications for ethics, society, and self-perception. Ethically, it challenges us to balance accountability with compassion for individuals undergoing significant change. Legally, it calls for frameworks that adapt to complexities of identity over time. On a personal level, this inquiry encourages individuals to embrace growth and transformation as integral aspects of their selfhood, rather than threats to their continuity.

Personal identity is not a static essence but is an evolving interaction of memory, narrative, and social connections. It is in this tension between change and continuity that we find the true nature of selfhood—a fluid, adaptable construct that resists definitive boundaries. As we continue to question what it means to remain "the same" over time, we open the door to deeper reflections on the meaning of life, responsibility, and our shared humanity.

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