Enigma of Personal Identity: What is it in virtue of which a person's younger self is identical to his later self?

Yancheng Shen

1. Introduction

In exploring personal identity, we are confronted with a perplexing dilemma: What is it in virtue of which a person's younger self is identical to his later self? Personal identity is a significant concept overarching philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, and ethics (Glover, 1988). It provoked debates amongst countless philosophers regarding ideas about human existence, challenging our understanding of self-continuity and selfhood. This essay explores this philosophical problem to better understand ourselves and our interpretations. To build on the foundation of the contrasting insights of philosophers John Locke and David Hume, whose perspectives are examined through concepts of psychological continuity theory, bodily continuity theory, and narrative theory. By shifting the focus on the roots of identity, I reason that the root of a person's identity is their rational nature, defined as the capacity for reason, abstract thought, and self-reflection that mark human beings as persons. If rational nature has been lost, it is only until his social/narrative identity is lost that the person has completely lost their identity. I posit The Tree Theory, which draws comparisons between our identity to the likings of a tree, I will further exemplify the theory through thought experiments and analogies.

2. Background information

Personal identity consists of three main concepts--psychological continuity theory, bodily continuity theory, and narrative theory. Psychological continuity theory emphasizes the continuity of psychological characteristics as the basis for personal identity (Parfit, 1984). Bodily continuity theory emphasizes the continuity of the physical body as the basis for personal identity (Reid, 1785). The narrative theory emphasizes the role of storytelling and that personal identity is shaped by narratives, those created by themselves or by others for them (Ricoeur, 1983). John Locke laid the groundwork for modern theories of personal identity. Inspired by Descartes' theory of mind and consciousness, Locke challenged the definitions of personal identity which focused on the bodily continuity theory and proposed that personal identity lies in the continuity of consciousness over time through memory (Locke, 1689). In other words, I am the same person as my five-year-old self if I can remember being five. He supports his claim through two experiments: The Prince and Cobbler Thought Experiment and The Ship of Theseus Paradox (Locke, 1689). The Lockean theory was deemed "circular and illogical" (Butler, 1736), as the Lockean theory requires memory as a prerequisite for personal identity. The paradox is that for one to acknowledge his memories consciously, he must already be an identity or self. Consciousness is always the consciousness of a subject - there must be an "I" that is consciously aware (Smith, 2020). As Reid puts it, "the relation of consciousness presupposes identity, and thus cannot constitute it." (Copenhaver, 2018). The Lockean theory also poorly addresses scenarios of amnesia. If one were to lose their memories, they slowly lose their identity too. However, while one is losing himself, other people around him will continue to associate him with the identity they previously held; despite memory loss, he will look the same, talk the same, and should not be considered to have lost his identity. Humans involuntarily modify our memories, deeming memory unreliable to an extent. Furthermore, neuroscience has proven the existence of false memories, deja-vus, and jamais vu (Burwell, 2017). Therefore, memories cannot serve as the basis for our identity.

Thus, through changing the criteria for the roots of identity, I reason that the root of a person's identity is his rational nature, defined as the capacity for reason, abstract thought, and self-reflection that mark human beings as persons.

3. "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose"

French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr wrote, "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" (1849), which translates to "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Karr suggested that, although we experience paramount changes in our bodies, minds, and experiences, these changes are on a surface level. Indeed, on a deeper level, our identity endures. As Reid argued, "If the identity of persons depends on the consciousness of past actions and thoughts, and on the power of making present thoughts and actions our own by memory and reflection...A man may lose his limbs, his memory, or his understanding and yet remain the same person" (1785). Though one's psychological and bodily self has undoubtedly transformed, some core part of his identity remains the "same." The psychological need for this sense of personal sameness reveals the social function of identity. Despite the changes, one's rational nature creates narratives and weaves them into an arborescent shape allowing one to recognize the identity or self as continuous. The inner essence, as well as the sense of selfhood and agency, persist through transformation. Beneath the outer flux, an inner constancy remains.

4. The Arborescent and the Arborist

Many philosophers have sought the root that constitutes a person (Burke, 2009). I posit that the root of a person's identity is his rational nature, defined as the capacity for reason, abstract thought, and self-reflection that mark human beings as persons (Kant, 1785). The tree may undergo many changes, including the color of its leaves, flowering, dormancy, or fruiting. However, if the roots or the recognizable whole of the tree remain the same from an outside perspective, the nature of the tree stays the same. Like the tree, an individual goes through changes while his identity remains the same. His root is everlasting until the cease of his existence. Although personal identity is grounded in rational nature, one can still be recognized as the same person if he is recognizable by others from an outside perspective. Although not annihilated, a cut-down tree, devoid of its roots, can no longer identify itself. This mirrors the state of an amnesiac. However, even in this state, the tree remains identifiable to an external observer, as the arborist who severed it from its roots. Amnesiacs maintain their recognizability to those familiar with them. When one's rational nature is lost or has not developed, his identity is displaced by bodily continuity and narrative. Others can recognize him through his biological attributes, physical appearance, and shared experiences. The tree can be said to have lost its identity once it is severed from its roots and unrecognizable from its former appearance. Personal identity is lost only when two crucial elements are absent: rational nature and external recognition.

5. The Neverending Train

Our identity is like a neverending train. Two drivers, one representing rational nature - the root of our identity; the other representing the emblem of narratives - the role of storytelling and narratives created by themselves or by others for them. As the name suggests, the train is neverending and have no destination, symbolizing the ever-evolving nature of personal identity. Personal identity is continuously shaped by thoughts, actions, relationships, and various roles throughout our lives (Carlsson, 2015). The stations represent different stages of your identity, a train at a station before your contemporary station is still an identity. The two trains must adhere to certain conditions to retain their identity.

1. The "Rational" driver of the earlier and later stations must be the same, indicating that the rational nature should be continuous throughout one's life.
2. The "Rational" driver at the later station should possess self-recognition, acknowledging its previous presence at the earlier station, and identifying its journey and existence as a singular entity.

However, if the "Rational" driver ceases to exist, the “Narrative” driver displaces it. The "Narrative" driver must follow two conditions to displace in the absence of the "Rational" driver.

1. There must be an entity that can identify the "Narrative" driver, meaning there must be an outside entity that can distinct you.
2. An external entity should perceive the continuity of the "Narrative" driver from earlier to present stations, implying someone socially recognize your continuous storyline.

The external identity doesn't need to make you aware of your storylines, what is necessary is just an external entity to recognize you. Like a train, one may encounter significant psychological, environmental, perception, narrative, bodily, and memory changes. If the two "Rational" driver conditions are fulfilled, the later self and the younger self hold the same personal identity. When the "Rational" driver ceased to exist, the "Narrative" driver allows the later self and younger self hold the same personal identity by following its two conditions.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I posit The Tree Theory, which states that the root of a person's identity is his rational nature, defined as the capacity for reason, abstract thought, and self-reflection that mark

human beings as persons. The theory is further discussed through three experiments: "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose," "The Arborescent and the Arborist," and "The Never-ending Train." Metaphors are employed to elaborate the theory. I propose that the later and earlier self must sustain the same rational nature. Meanwhile, the later self must acknowledge its past existence and sense of selfhood as a singular entity. Despite the ebb and flow of external changes, a core of constancy remains intact within.

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