

Seth Carter
03/07/2017

Evaluation and Objections to Judith Thomson in "People and their Bodies"

In her essay, "People and their Bodies," Judith Thomson writes an evaluation of several formulations of the psychological criterion for personality, explaining her criticisms of each. The fundamental problem Thomson identifies that she believes makes the psychological criterion weaker than a physical criterion is that she does not believe the psychological criterion offers a clear ontological thesis of personhood, and that this omission leads to several problems in clarifying the psychological view of personal identity as well as puzzlingly counterintuitive implications.¹ In this essay, I will explain Thomson's central criticisms against what she refers to as Pure, Impure, and Hybrid conceptions of psychological criteria for personal identity and proceed to consider possible objections to her position that a proponent of a psychological view might respond with.² These objections will primarily be focused on how Thomson chooses to characterize psychological criteria and her hastiness in drawing conclusions with dramatic implications for the view.

Thomson begins her analysis of the psychological approach to personal identity by means of several similar thought experiments in which a man, Brown, has his

¹ Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers." Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers. January 01, 1970. Accessed March 07, 2017. <https://philpapers.org/rec/THOPAT-3>. p. 205

² Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers." Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers. January 01, 1970. Accessed March 07, 2017. <https://philpapers.org/rec/THOPAT-3>. p. 207,209

psychology or brain somehow implanted in the body of a different man, Robinson, under different conditions. By entertaining the thought of Brown's brain being transplanted into Robinson's body, Thomson is able to consider two alternatives - one where the brain retains the psychological properties of Brown and thus, the Robinson-body displays the psychological characteristics of Brown; and one where the brain from Brown's body is altered by drugs such that it resembles the Robinson's body original brain. In these two cases, Thomson points out that we would be inclined to agree that the first of the two apparently appears to preserve Brown's identity while the only reason we would seem to have for the second case preserving Brown would be that the brain originally came from Brown's body, the fact of which alone, Thomson points out, does not appear determinative of identity if the psychology has the features of the original Robinson.

On the basis of the distinction drawn between the two cases in which the presence of psychological continuity seems to be factor determining whether or not we say Brown has survived the procedure, Thomson clarifies two possible positions for the advocate of a psychological criterion - the *pure psychological criterion* in which reprogramming Robinson's brain with the psychology present in Brown's brain would be sufficient for a transfer of identity, and the *impure psychological criterion*, in which only the transfer of the fully physical brain of Brown as a carrier of his psychology would be sufficient for transferring his identity into Robinson's body. Thomson explicitly chooses

to not consider as seriously the impure psychological criterion in her analysis of psychological justification for personal identity on the basis that she cannot see why it would be necessary for the same physical brain to generate the transported psychology.³ She uses the example of a transplanted, brain-reprogramming liver from Brown as a means of demonstrating the superfluosity of any particular transplanted part to the psychological view.⁴

In considering the Pure Psychological criterion in more depth, Thomson proceeds to criticize that the view ultimately does not seem adequate to answering the question of what a person's ontological status might be thought to be without some kind of revision or clarification. She considers a possible answer from the Psychological criterion proponent in the form of a *Hybrid View of Personal Identity* in which personal identity is thought to be determined by psychological continuity, but that persons nonetheless are their bodies ontologically. Thomson proceeds to consider several problematic implications of this conclusion, namely the seeming inconsistency from asserting that identity results from the possibility of psychologically continuous duplicates in distinct physical bodies or what she claims to be the necessity of inter-

³ Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers." Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers. January 01, 1970. Accessed March 07, 2017. <https://philpapers.org/rec/THOPAT-3>. p.206,207

⁴ Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers." Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers. January 01, 1970. Accessed March 07, 2017. <https://philpapers.org/rec/THOPAT-3>. p.207

temporal metaphysical objects as an implausible conclusion for delineating persons within this framework.⁵

It is primarily in Thomson's limitation of what she believes to be a reasonable view of a psychological criterion for personal identity that I believe a proponent of the psychological criterion may find to be the most mistaken aspect of her critique. Firstly, Thomson does not seem to at all recognize in her Brown thought experiment the possibility that reprogramming the brain with the psychology once housed in a different brain may lead to a qualitatively identical set of psychological characteristics, but not a numerically identical set. Presuming that an essentially identical psychological state can arise from wholly new matter appears to be a significant assumption that Thomson does not explain. If numerical identity is not necessary, it is not clear why this would be the case or at least why we should presume it. One could seemingly be skeptical that the same numerical flow of consciousness could be transplanted by information reprogramming alone. It's not clear at all how identity or my experience as a person would be conserved when it seems as though it may be another conscious experiencer who incidentally has my character, memories, and preferences due to an information upload. The Impure Psychological Criterion appears sufficient in a way that the Pure is not because it seems to ensure (assuming that all adequate brain and neurological structures are successfully transplanted) that not only my outwardly

⁵ Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers." Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers. January 01, 1970. Accessed March 07, 2017. <https://philpapers.org/rec/THOPAT-3>. p.209,210

evident and demonstrable psychological characteristics are conserved, but that I am numerically the same conscious experiencer as the person prior to the transplant. Furthermore, Thomson does not appear to provide any descriptive justification for arguing against the Pure as opposed to the Impure conception other than the notion of the brain-reprogramming liver, which seems difficult to conceive at all as a counterfactual possibility, at least without some further causal elaboration of what she actually figures to occur.

An example further demonstrating the problem of the Pure conception as a catch-all characterization of the psychological criterion of the would be to suppose that I were to fall asleep and all of the relevant information from my brain was stored on a computer and used to reconfigure the brain of another sleeping person such that he becomes psychologically identical to me in memory, character, and preferences. Following this process, my body is then completely destroyed. Is there any reason to think that I should wake up and have the experience of being the once distinct sleeping person after this procedure is performed? Unless the phenomenon of my entire experience of my outside and inner worlds is emergent purely from the information stored in my or any brain, it doesn't seem that my experience of the world that I consider fundamental to me would be conserved. Even if the assumption is granted that my entire experience may be thought to emerge from information alone, how then would it be explained that I would not have conscious experience as the computer that

my brain's data was housed in? If I were to then concede the possibility of having a conscious and full personal experience as an advanced enough computer, then if the data in my brain is left in the computer as the new brain and body with my information awakens, which one would I then be supposed to have the experience of being? Having the experience of being both a computer and a new body with a new brain simultaneously seems nearly impossible to conceive, let alone consider a possibility. This thought experiment could seemingly be extended to include an infinite number of computers, bodies, and brains with my identical information to the point where imagining an experience as all of these entities simultaneously seems much too difficult to accept in any manner that would lead me to conclude preservation of identity. Although Thomson may have a concurrent opinion that the results of the thought experiment weigh against consideration of the Pure formulation of the psychological criterion, it's curious that she does not view this problem as reason to consider the Impure Psychological criterion more seriously as opposed to the Pure Psychological criterion that she insists on addressing with more detail.

Insofar as an a proponent of the Hybrid Personal Identity criterion may respond to Thomson's claims of implausible necessary implications, it appears as though there may be other alternatives that could be invoked outside of the view that persons be determined by inter-temporal metaphysics as Thomson claims.⁶ One possible approach

⁶ Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers." Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers. January 01, 1970. Accessed March 07, 2017. <https://philpapers.org/rec/THOPAT-3>. p.215

for the Hybridist, instead of trying to separate bodily persons across time and consistently connect them with psychological continuity, could be to interpret a particular mind and psychology as emergent of the numerical identical physical brain that a person possesses. This approach would seem to preclude the possibility of body-switching and thus serve the Hybridist by avoiding the implications of duplicates with which the Pure Psychology criterion proponent must contend. It is a concern that saying a person is entirely identical to her body could not be entirely consistent with an emergentist position, but this potential alteration of the Hybridist position nonetheless seems to avoid the problems of sharing identity with multiple, psychologically continuous bodies and can characterize the relation between psychological characteristics of a person and brain that do not necessarily need to call upon inter-temporal metaphysics. Rather, the psychological continuity of personal identity could instead be redefined to only include the the numerical psychological characteristics emergent from one bodily brain as opposed to many other candidate brains from which distinct numerical psychologies could be said to emerge, even with identical information uploaded into them.

Bibliography

Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers."

Judith Jarvis Thomson, People and their bodies - PhilPapers. January 01, 1970.

Accessed March 07, 2017. <https://philpapers.org/rec/THOPAT-3>. p.207