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## *Identity in Limbo*

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How can I explain the continued existence of myself as a being that exists continuously, from one moment to the next, when everything about my being is perpetually changing? How can I be sure that I am the same being today as I was ten years ago? For that matter, how can I be sure that I am the same being now as I was ten seconds ago? Exactly what are the criteria that account for the continuity of my personal identity? Often I take for granted the idea that my identity is fixed, even though the characteristics of my personality and properties of my body are constantly changing. Indubitably, everything about me as an individual is constantly changing. My mind changes with age: old memories fade and new memories are made. My body also changes with age: old cells decay, new cells develop, and the cycle continues as my entire physical being replenishes itself over and over again to such an extent that every cell in my body today is different from the cells that were in my body as a newborn. Why is it, then, that I feel as though I am one continuous being that exists through such extensive change? Is this feeling that I am one perpetual person correct, or am I a different person at different moments?

To answer the question of personal identity, philosophers generally examine two possible criteria: the *criterion of continuity of memory* and the *criterion of continuity of body*. Some argue that personal identity is independent of the body and that all that is needed to account for personal identity is the continuity of memory. Others, however, argue that continuity of memory alone is an insufficient criterion for personal identity; they maintain that humans intuitively value their physical make-up to such an extent that a criterion of continuity of body must also be taken into account. In this essay, I will examine and weigh important arguments from both camps and show how personal identity requires something much more than either criterion on its own. I will argue, then, that both memory and body are crucial elements of personal identity. Further, I will illustrate how, in some cases, human intuition gives emphasis to memory over body and, in other cases, body over memory.

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In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke argues that the persistence of personal identity is determined by memory alone. He maintains that person *A* is the same as person *B* if and only if *A* can remember enough of what happened to *B*.<sup>1</sup> According to Locke, then, I am the same person today as I was ten years ago if and only if I can currently remember enough about what my life was like ten years ago. Even though my body has grown and my personality has changed, I am still the same person as I was ten years ago insofar as I have significant memory of my past. Locke accounts for the persistence of personal identity by drawing a connection between a conscious being at one moment and consciousness at another moment. He says, "it being the same consciousness that makes a man be himself to himself, personal identity depends on that only, whether it be annexed solely to one individual substance, or can be continued in a succession of several substances."<sup>2</sup> This statement implies that personal identity is not determined solely by the physical substance that makes up the human body. Furthermore, it implies that personality can theoretically be transferred from one thinking substance to another. According to Locke, a transfer of identity is possible if one memory is passed from one body to another.

Roderick Chisholm, however, rejects the Lockean account of personal identity. He argues that it is logically incoherent to propose a dichotomy between 'I' (that is, my psyche) and the 'thinking substance' in which 'I' am purportedly contained. Chisholm points out that this dichotomy allows for only four possible relationships between 'I' and the thinking substance, and all four of these relationships lead to absurd conclusions. He outlines the problem as follows. First, he asks: If there are two things involved in the persistence of the self — that is, both 'I' and a thinking substance — which thing is it that actually does the thinking? There are four options but each of them is impossible. (1) *Neither 'I' nor the thinking substance thinks*. If this were the case, however, then it

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1. Julie Anna Allen, "Personal Identity" Lecture. York University, Toronto. 29 November 2005.

2. John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding: In Two Volumes*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York: Dover, 1959), 1: 451.

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would simply be impossible for a person to have consciousness. If nothing is thinking, then there is no thought, but there is thought so it is not the case that neither 'I' nor a thinking substance thinks. (2) *'I' think but the thinking substance does not.* This is also illogical because if it were the case that 'I' think but the thinking substance does not, then there would be no reason to call the latter a 'thinking' substance. One might respond to this point by saying that 'I' am contained in a non-thinking substance, a sort of shell that carries 'I', but this response would be inadequate since it fails to explain how a being that thinks could be contained in a being that does not think. For if 'I' were attached to, or a part of, a non-thinking substance, 'I' would have to be some sort of part or substance of that substance which holds 'I'. But if 'I' think, then it is impossible for the 'I' to be a part or a substance because parts and substances are non-thinking beings. Therefore, it is not the case that 'I' think but the thinking substance does not. (3) *The thinking substance thinks but 'I' do not think.* If the thinking substance thinks but 'I' do not think, then somehow the thinking substance tricks itself into thinking that 'I' am thinking and it is not when really 'I' am not and it is. Such circularity is nonsensical and should therefore be abandoned. (4) *Both 'I' and the thinking substance think.* If 'I' and the thinking substance think, then it seems that entities have been multiplied unnecessarily; if the self has a thought, there is no reason to suppose that it belongs to both 'I' and a thinking substance. Chisholm concludes, therefore, that the dichotomy between 'I' and a thinking substance is absurd. Further, he claims that since 'I' and a thinking substance are inextricably conjoined, "there is no significant sense in which we may speak of the transfer of a self from one substance or individual thing to another."<sup>3</sup>

As an alternative to the Lockean account, Chisholm offers his own explanation of how individuals are able to retain a sense of identity in the midst of perpetual change. Chisholm proposes that the Leibnizian definition of identicalness be set aside when dealing with accounts of personal identity. Leibniz's law states that one thing is identical to another if and only if the former has all of the same properties as the latter. That is, *X* and *Y* are identical if and

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3. Roderick Chisholm, "The Persistence of Persons," *Person and Object* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1976), 3.

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only if  $X$  has every property of  $Y$ . This definition is a problem for most accounts of personal identity because, as noted above, persons are constantly undergoing change. According to Leibniz's law, the only thing identical to me at this moment is me at this moment; in the next moment I will acquire and lose some properties and therefore be non-identical to who I was in the last moment. Chisholm claims that this definition is too "strict and philosophical"<sup>4</sup> for an ordinary understanding of the persistence of individuals through time. He urges that, along with the Lockean notion of transitive identity, the notion of strict identity be abandoned. Instead of these rigid and deeply philosophical notions, Chisholm argues that a 'loose' definition of identicalness may sufficiently account for the contiguity of identity. He does not, however, venture to elaborate on exactly what criteria should be taken into account for a loose yet sufficient definition of identity.

Another objection to the Lockean account comes from Bishop Joseph Butler in his work, *Of Personal Identity*. Butler outlines the apparent circularity in Locke's position. The objection of circularity is as follows: To say that  $A$  equals  $B$  if and only if  $A$  remembers  $B$  is a flawed proposition because it *presupposes* a relationship between  $A$  and  $B$ . To say that I am the same person I was ten years ago if I remember the life of that person from ten years ago presupposes that I am somehow connected to that person, when really I might not be. According to Butler, there is nothing definitive about a relationship based entirely on memory, for if person  $A$  remembers enough about person  $B$ 's life, it does not necessarily follow that  $A$  is  $B$ . He says, "one should really think it self-evident that consciousness of personal identity presupposes, and therefore cannot constitute, personal identity, any more than knowledge, in any other case, can constitute truth, which it presupposes."<sup>5</sup> Personal identity based on a presupposed connection between two conscious beings (e.g., a current self and a past self) is arbitrary and unqualified in the same way that knowledge based on a presupposed truth is arbitrary and unqualified. Presupposing the truth of a matter and then claiming that knowledge can be based on that truth in no way qualifies that

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4. Roderick Chisholm, "Persistence of Persons," 4.

5. Sydney Shoemaker, "Persons and their Pasts," *Identity, Cause and Mind*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 29-30.

knowledge as actually true or justified. Locke presupposes that *A*'s memory of *B* is enough to equate *A* with *B*, but *A*'s memory could be a fabrication or someone else's memory. For example, I could have a memory of the experiences of another person, say from a movie or a book, and I could mistake those memories for my own. I could also invent a memory by telling myself a story and eventually convince my subconscious that the fabricated story was a real experience. In such cases, there is no real connection between what I remember and what I experienced in the real world.

Nevertheless, Sydney Shoemaker defends this attack of the Lockean account by elucidating the conditions that must be met in order for the memory equation (*A* is *B* only if *A* remembers *B*) to suffice as a criterion for personal identity. He claims that *A* is *B* if and only if *A* remembers enough about *B* and *A*'s epistemic access to *B* is due to *A*'s firsthand experience of *B* in the real world. There are two essential parts to this new equation: (1) The 'previous awareness condition' and (2) the 'immunity to error condition'. The previous awareness condition entails that it is necessary for *A* to remember *B* in order to equate *A* with *B*. This condition entails that for me to be the same person I was ten years ago, I must first of all remember a life from ten years ago. The immunity to error condition entails that *A*'s memory of *B* is sufficient for *A*'s identity with *B* only if *A*'s relationship to *B* accords with a historically existential state of affairs; that is, *A*'s memory of *B* is immune to error if *A* actually experienced *B* in the real world. This second condition entails that not only must I have memory of a life from ten years ago, but that memory must also originate from an experience I had in the real world. Shoemaker goes a step further than Locke does by distinguishing actual memories from 'quasi-memories.' While actual memories are caused by actual experiences, quasi-memories are factious and independent first person experience. *A* is *B*, then, if *A* remembers *B* and *A*'s memory is based on the experiences of *B* from a first person perspective. Under these conditions, I am only now the same person as I was ten years ago if I remember the person I was ten years ago and my memory is the result of my first person experiences of the actual world ten years ago. This account breaks the trail of circularity that Butler assigns to Locke's theory because, rather than presupposing a relationship between *A* and *B*, Shoemaker

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insists that personal identity is verifiable if *A*'s memory is a direct effect of *B*'s cognitive sensory experience.<sup>6</sup>

To illustrate the importance of memory as a criterion for personal identity, Shoemaker proposes a thought experiment similar to what follows. Imagine that I undergo an operation and have my brain transplanted into the body of Queen Elizabeth. If this were to happen, would my personal identity be in the Queen's body or my body? Shoemaker argues that most people intuitively think that wherever memory goes, identity goes. Since modern science explains that my memory is contained within my brain, if my brain is in the Queen's body, then my memory is in the Queen's body. The Queen's body would hold my brain which holds my memory which is directly connected to my experience of the world. According to Shoemaker, the Queen's body would also therefore hold my personal identity. I would have the body of the Queen. At any rate, this account, like Locke's, holds that memory is the key to personal identity, while the body is relatively insignificant. But is this right? Is my body so irrelevant and detached from my identity? In what follows, I will explain how it is not the cases that body is irrelevant and detached from identity, but that intuitively, the body is an essential part of personal identity.

Bernard Williams, in *The Self and the Future*, argues that human beings have conflicting intuitions about the importance of memory and body with regard to personal identity. He postulates two thought experiments that show these conflicting intuitions quite clearly. While the first shows the *importance of memory* and the *unimportance of body*, the second shows the *importance of body* and the *unimportance of memory*.<sup>7</sup> For the first thought experiment, imagine two persons, say George Bush and I. We are about to undergo an operation in exactly one hour. The operation will be an exchange of memories; my memory will be put into the body of Bush and Bush's memory will be put into my body. Also, something else will occur sometime within two hours: one of the two bodies will be tortured, while the other body will be given a foot massage. Intuitively, I would hope that whenever the torture and foot massage

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6. Sydney Shoemaker, "Persons and their Pasts."

7. The following scenarios are inspired by Bernard Williams's "The Self and the Future."

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are given out, my memory is in whichever body is given a foot massage and not the one that is tortured. In such a situation I intuitively identify my self with my memory and not my body. In this situation memory is considered the only criterion for determining identity.

Now, consider a second scenario where there are two persons, say, Saddam Hussein and I. Hussein has me captive in a bunker and tells me that in ten seconds I will be tortured in the most horrendous fashion. He also assures me I will have no memory of the torture or of the announcement of the torture and it will leave me without any scars or other reminders of torture. He says that all that will happen is my body will be tortured but I will have no memory of it. How do I intuitively feel about this situation? Even though my memory will not be tortured, something makes me feel uneasy and worried to know my body will be. Regardless of what happens to my memory, I hope that those ten seconds pass and my body is not tortured. Intuitively, I would care only about my body and not my memory. In this scenario, human intuition places great importance on body and insignificance on memory. Williams notes that looking at these types of scenarios "each of which carries conviction", together "lead to contrary conclusions."<sup>8</sup> Sometimes humans intuitively disregard body as a criterion for determining personal identity and only consider the memory important. Other times, humans intuitively disregard memory as a criterion and only consider the body as important.

As I sit here wondering what makes me who I am, and what makes me the same person now as I was ten years ago, I realize that neither the criterion of memory nor the criterion of body alone suffices to explain the intuitive feeling I have that I am one person continuously. It seems that a combination of both memory and body, or perhaps something even more profound, gives me a feeling of continuous personal identity. What is clear to me, though, is that intuitively my memory and body are both crucial elements of my self.

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8. Bernard Williams, "The Self and the Future," *The Philosophical Review* 79, no. 2 (April 1970): 161-180.