On Personal Identity Over Time

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In this paper I will argue that Sydney Shoemaker's account of personal identity over time is insufficient, concluding that his argument (and, thus John Locke's account as well) needs further improvement.

First I will discuss the problem of personal identity as Shoemaker presents it in, "Personal Identity: A Materialists Account". I will then, examine Locke's memory account of personal identity, as well as its motivations and the problems it faces, as outlined by Shoemaker. Next, I will examine Shoemaker's account of personal identity (which he offers in response to the issues Locke's memory account faces). I will then assess Shoemaker's view and conclude that it, and other psychological-continuity views, are insufficient at arguing for personal identity across time by highlighting a real-world possible scenario which counters his argument, and an implicit, problematic assumption made by psychological-continuity theorists at large as outlined by Eric T. Olson and Karsten Witt in, "Against Person Essentialism".

The problem of personal identity as Shoemaker formulates it, asks how we can understand a person [A], at a given time [t1], as being the same person as a person [B] at a given time [t2] (Shoemaker 1984, 74). In simpler words, the problem of personal identity asks how we can understand the continuity of a person's identity through time.

Locke offers an account of personal identity that can be thought of as follows:

1. A person [A] at time [t1] is the same person as person [B] at time [t2] if person [B] can recall person [A]'s experience at time [t1] from a first-person point of view or "as a

memory" (Shoemaker 1984, 77-8).

Locke wants to hold that our memories, reasonably, contain what we directly experienced; thus if I, person [B] have a memory of person [A]'s experience at time [t1], I *must* be the same person as them because, Locke argues, I cannot *have a memory* of someone else's first-person experience unless I *am* that person (Shoemaker 1984, 77-8). Locke's motivation for his memory account of personal identity can be better understood through a thought experiment. In this experiment the mind of a prince swaps into the body of a cobbler and vice versa (Shoemaker 1984, 78-9). Locke holds that in this scenario we would be inclined to say the prince, or the prince's identity, lies in the person which contains his mind, despite it being within the cobbler's body and, again, vice versa (Locke 1975, 340 as cited in Shoemaker 1984, 78-9). Locke's memory account of personal identity is clearly motivated by the inclination, or instinct, the thought experiment highlights: we want to say our personal identity is aligned with our mind and its components (our personality, character traits, memories, etc.) rather than our physical bodies.

Aside from Locke's instinctual motivation to tie up personal identity with our minds instead of our physical bodies, it's important to note explicitly why we may want to avoid tying our personal identity across time to our physical bodies, for reasons more serious than pure intuition. A person cannot be identical to their body if our formulation of personal identity allows for the possibility of someone changing bodies (like in the Prince and Cobbler mind-swap scenario) (Shoemaker 1984, 107). As Shoemaker puts it, "if a person is capable of undergoing a change of body, he has a property-the 'modal' property of being able to exist at a time or place at

which that body does not exist--which his body does not" (Shoemaker 1984, 107). Since we seem to exist in a world where it is indeed possible to undergo a "change of body", and we do not want to posit a view of personal identity which allows for a person to exist when the qualifiers of his existence (i.e. his body) do not exist (this argument would be wholly insufficient), we will avoid grounding personal identity into anything having to do with our physical bodies.

Now that we have outlined Locke's account of personal identity, we can dig into the two major problems it faces. The first is raised by Reid, who objects to Locke's account on the basis that it cannot uphold the principle of the transitivity of identity. The principle of transitivity of identity holds that for objects x, y, z, if x=y and y=z, then x=z. Reid argues this principle must be held up by any successful theory of personal identity (Shoemaker 1984, 80-1). Reid offers an example along these lines in which a person [A] at a time [t1] has an experience which person [B] at time [t2] remembers in the way necessary for Locke's formulation to hold that [A] and [B] are the same person (Shoemaker 1984, 80). Reid then proposes there is a person [C] at time [t3] who remembers the experience of person [B] at [t2] (again, in the way necessary for Locke's formulation to hold that [B] and [C] are the same person), but does *not* remember the experience of person [A] at time [t1] anymore (Shoemaker 1984, 80). When examining this scenario from Locke's account, persons [C] and [B] are identical, persons [B] and [A] are identical, but persons [C] and [A] are *not* identical. Thus, Reid shows Locke's account of personal identity violates the logical transitivity principle by holding that person [C] is both *identical and not identical* to his past self (persons [B] and [A] respectively).

The second major problem for Locke comes in form of the circularity objection. The circularity objection holds that Locke's account seems to presuppose the notion of personal identity in order to be successful. Locke defines memory as something akin to a first-person account of an experience or "remembering from the inside" and we know he also claims that memory can be used to explain how our personal identity is linked across time (Shoemaker 1984, 82). If memory is a first-person account of events (e.g. *I* am remembering when *I* had *my* 4th birthday party), then the definition and identification of a memory requires a notion of personal identity already being established, and it *cannot* be used to explain how personal identity is formed. If we want to avoid a circular argument, memory cannot be used to justify personal identity (Shoemaker 1984, 82).

Now we can turn to Shoemaker's account, which can potentially serve as an improvement to Locke's account of personal identity. Shoemaker posits that memory of *all* "person-stages" of yourself through time is not necessary, but rather there must be a link between each "person-stage" of yourself through time that is remembered and connected in order for personal identity to remain the same across time (Shoemaker 1984, 89-91). A "person-stage", in this sense, is a "temporal slice" of a person's history (Shoemaker 1984, 75). In other words, a "person-stage" can be thought of as a small temporal piece which, when continuously, spatiotemporally related to other small temporal pieces, can comprise a larger temporal whole (Shoemaker 1984, 75, 90). Shoemaker's argument also extends to include any causally-related psychological continuity as viable for proving personal identity throughout time, so long as the given psychological continuity is "appropriately related" to the given subject (Shoemaker 1984, 90).

Relevantly, Shoemaker also raises a thought experiment (the "fission case", a kind of "branching") in which a person [X]'s brain is split and its left and right hemispheres are put into two separate bodies (Shoemaker 1984, 89). In this experiment, the "new" right brain person [XR] and left brain person [XL], on Shoemaker's psychological continuity account, are each *identical* to the original person [X] (Shoemaker 1984, 89). However, [XR] and [XL] are *not* identical to each other and, thus, Shoemaker's formulation of personal identity breaks down.

Shoemaker raises this concern to make another conclusion about the nature of his argument. He holds that the fission case motivates the idea that personal identity and psychological continuity can potentially come apart. This point is important to Shoemaker because, he argues, it resolves the issue raised against Locke's memory account in the circularity objection. If we base our proof of personal identity in psychological continuity only, we do not need to have any formed notion of personal identity through which to examine memories, or any other form of psychological continuity we might investigate— we only need to examine some link between continuities across time, irrespective of first-person accounts. Shoemaker amends his own argument to explicitly exclude "fission cases" because of this worry.

Although Shoemaker's account of personal identity certainly makes large improvements on Locke's memory account, I argue there is something about personal identity we are still not capturing properly. To illustrate my concern, I ask we examine cases of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). People who have DID have two or more distinct personality identities (colloquially called "alters") which, at any given time, can surface and take control of a person's behavior— each identity potentially having their own name, age, personality traits, and "personal

history”, or first-person memories (Gentile, Dillon, & Gillig, 2013, 24).

Typically, people will go through some kind of deeply traumatic experience and develop DID as a kind of trauma response. This seems to insinuate that the different personal identities of a person with DID likely come about at a time other than the person’s “core” personal identity (i.e. the person they were before or personality they had before the onset of DID). Additionally, it’s important to note here that people who have DID cannot simply switch from one personality identity to the other at will; these changes from identity to identity happen outside of the “core” person’s control (Gentile, Dillon, & Gillig, 2013, 24).

Given the difficulty of living with DID, treatment for the condition is very important. Treatment mainly consists of psychotherapy, which aims to integrate all of the varying personal identities back into the original, core personal identity (Gentile, Dillon, & Gillig, 2013, 26-7). The hope is that through integration, the person with DID will accept responsibility and ownership of all personal identities as part of their original, core personal identity, and no longer experience episodes where their alters take over their consciousness completely (Gentile, Dillon, & Gillig, 2013, 26-7).

In a way, we can think about these cases of DID as another kind of branching. In the fission case, the branching occurred physically, in the splitting of the brain into two different bodies, but in the case of DID, we might think of their condition as purely *psychological* branching— though all of these different personal identities are housed within the same body, they seem to have their own unique names, ages, traits, and first-person memories. On Shoemaker’s account, any of the given alters would have different personal identities from one

another, despite all being housed in the same mind and body.

There is a clear worry here when we begin to discuss the treatment of DID cases, wherein the goal is to integrate all alter personal identities back into one original, core personal identity. Each of a DID patient's alters would seem to meet the criteria for Shoemaker's formulation of personhood, and thus should be treated as individual persons. But, if each of these alters are *truly* individual persons, how could we integrate all of them into a single personal identity through psychotherapy treatment? After integration it's not obvious that they would experience anything akin to having an individual personal identity separate from the personal identity of the core person, as they *were* able to before. Surely integrating the alters into a single person would cause them to lose something fundamental about their existence as persons. Further yet, somehow this kind of integration does not seem as metaphysically significant as it would be if the person's original, core identity ceased to exist. What makes the original, core personality metaphysically privileged over the alters?

The DID case brings out a missing piece in Shoemaker's argument (and psychological continuity arguments more broadly)— we have not clearly defined what it is to be a person in the first place. Perhaps we can save Shoemaker's account of personal identity if we figure out *what exactly makes something a person*. That way, we could know *exactly* whether or not alters qualify as persons and/or how the original, core person diagnosed with DID should (metaphysically) relate to them.

All the arguments for personal identity over time which we have investigated thus far have importantly had an implicit assumption: if something is a person at a given time, they could

not have existed at another time without having been a person then as well. This view, or assumption, is fairly critical to existing theories of personal identity dubbed "person essentialism" by Eric T. Olsen and Karsten Witt, and has been pushed back on in the pair's, 'Against Person Essentialism'. In summary, the person essentialist wants to say that being a person is an essential quality of a person— nothing can be a person now and not a person later without ceasing to exist entirely. In other words, something cannot be a non-person at one time and a person at another time. The theories of personal identity over time that we have discussed so far from Locke and Shoemaker assume this idea implicitly. They do not first ask, "If something is a person at one time and something exists at another time (whether or not it is a person …), what is necessary and sufficient for them to be one and the same?" (Olson & Witt 2020, 4), they only ask, "what makes the same person" (Locke 1975, 336 as cited in Olson & Witt 2020, 4).

Person essentialism is quite a problematic assumption for psychological-continuity theories. For example, Locke's conception of personhood (that to be a person is to be "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself," (Locke 1975, 335 as cited in Olson & Witt 2020, 2), combined with its implicit assumption of person essentialism, would force us to say that someone in a vegetative state is not a person at all— they no longer have the thinking properties that are required to be a person. Worse yet, because they are not a person now, they were *never* a person at any time in their life.

The same goes for an embryo in utero: since the embryo does not meet the psychological-continuity parameters set by Locke, it is not a person. Assuming the embryo grows properly and

is born into the world as a baby, that baby *is* a person— but, they would also have psychological continuity with the embryo, despite the embryo *not* being a person (Olson & Witt 2020, 7). Even if only some people experience a vegetative state towards the end of their life, we know empirically that *each of us persons* developed from embryos, and yet by "Lockean person essentialism" we must exist as entirely separate beings from the embryos that preceded us, since a person at one time cannot exist as a nonperson at another time (Olson & Witt 2020, 2).

There's a serious problem here and Olson & Witt summarize it simply: "We are all psychologically continuous—in the right way and with no branching—with beings as they are at times when they are not people in the Lockean sense. It follows that either we were once non-people, contrary to person essentialism, or such psychological continuity is insufficient for us to persist, contrary to psychological-continuity views," (Olson & Witt 2020, 9).

There are a few ways forward from the problems raised via person essentialism. Olson and Witt entertain an 'intermediate view' which holds that the capability for having mental powers is essential for being a person (dubbed "psychological continuity"), but ultimately dismiss it as unattractive, citing several other thinkers who find it a wholly unacceptable option at all. They claim we are left with two options:

1. Affirm person essentialism and solve the problems that it brings about.

This entails outlining either a "metaphysical" solution which can explain why an embryo cannot survive development into a healthy child despite its being "physically and psychologically continuous with one" or a "psychological" solution which can explain why "a fetus that survived

[the development into a healthy child] could never become intelligent and self-conscious" (Olson & Witt 2020, 18).

2. Abandon person essentialism and accept a view of personal identity that avoids the consequential problems of abandoning this view

Olson and Witt argue that the "most natural" view to assume here would be that "we are biological organisms" (Olson & Witt 2020, 16-8).

Where does this leave us? We have established that, despite the improvements made by Shoemaker to Locke's work, psychological-continuity accounts are still insufficient at outlining personal identity across time. In order for the psychological-continuity theorist to make a successful argument about personal identity, they must amend their view(s) tremendously to account for the worries brought to fore by both the DID case and person essentialism. Olson & Witt seem to think this means adopting one of the two options above— the first of which will entail a massive upending of the way we think about human development, and the second of which directly contradicts the core tenet of Shoemaker and Locke's theories (that personal identity is grounded in the psychological).

References

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