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Existence in the Absence of Personal Identity

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the philosophical concept of personal identity. I detail a metaphysics that explains what we are and who we are by virtue of being human. I argue that, by looking at the persistence question from the perspective of science and human intuition, there is no one thing that remains the same throughout a human life i.e. there is no such thing as personal identity (as it is traditionally defined). We should instead view our lives as a collection of selves or ‘temporal parts of animals’ as put by David Lewis. I offer an account of the self in terms of psychological connectedness- a term pioneered and borrowed from Derek Parfit’s essay Personal Identity in which he claims that what matters in survival can have degrees. We continue to exist only to the degree that certain direct psychological relations hold. What matters in the survival of persons is entirely subjective and differs from person to person. The existence of a human being is differentiated from the existence of a person and the existence of a self. The riddle of personal identity is imperative because its conclusion determines not only how we function in a society, but also how it should be structured.

Keywords: Personal Identity, Parfit, Psychological Connectedness, Self, Person, Lewis
Introduction

Personal identity is a social construct meaning it is “an idea that has been created and accepted by the people in a society”\(^1\). Like most social constructs, its conception is often subtle and drawn out over decades; however, there comes a time when all of society's machinations should be deconstructed in order to assess their benefits and failings. The creation of a self is not inherent or natural; it requires the existence of other selves arranged in a society, for the sole purpose of existing within said society. The vocabulary of identity implies some sort of singularity that simply does not exist. The abandonment of personal identity directs us to live in the moment, without dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. Daniel Dennett’s theory of the self can be summarized in his concise declaration that “A self, according to my theory, is...an abstraction defined by the myriads of attributions and interpretations...that have composed the biography of the living body whose Center of Narrative Gravity it is.” (Dennett 426-27). Like Dennett, I take the existence of living bodies (i.e. *Homo sapiens*) for granted. This account can be reworked and elaborated on in the pursuit of a full-bodied anti-identity theory. This essay takes on each of his claims in the order they are presented in *Consciousness Explained*; providing support for some and criticisms for others while acknowledging possible objections to my view along with my responses to them. In conclusion, I express my view in the wake of Dennett, and assess the societal and individual implications of this re-formulated theory.

**Biological Self**

Dennett’s first claim is that we have a “minimal proclivity to distinguish self from other in order to protect oneself”, he terms this the “biological self” which is not a “concrete thing but just an abstraction...” (Dennett 414). This recognition of the physical separation between body

and world is apparently a fundamental biological principle, the boundaries of which are “porous and indefinite” (Dennett 414); implying that all living things must make this abstract yet fluid distinction.

For the sake of clarity, I think it would be best if Dennett altered the name of this process to not include the word ‘self’. Since it is precisely the aim of his theory to define a self, using the term in other regards is confusing and leaves room for doubt. Instead, he might use the term ‘biological alienation’. This way, we retain an account of the aforementioned action, without suggesting that amoebas and the like have any type of ‘self’.

Making of the Self

His next claim is “Each normal individual of this species [Homo sapiens] makes a self. Out of its brain it spins a web of words and deeds, and...it doesn’t have to know what it’s doing; it just does it.” (Dennett 416), “Stripped of it, an individual human being is as incomplete as a bird without its feathers,...” (Dennett 416). I take this to mean that the process of self creation is innate- the brain instinctively takes the inputs it is given and, unbeknownst to us, fabricates a self. At this point a self is nothing more than an amalgamation of all thoughts and actions associated with a biologically unique being. Dennett goes further by saying that this process belongs to ‘normal individual[s]’, the lack of which leaves a human being ‘incomplete’. It seems odd that Dennett chose the word ‘incomplete’ when referring to human beings. What does complete entail? Furthermore, since we do not actively create selves there would need to be an external party willing to assess selfhood.

I would like to introduce a thought experiment that challenges this notion of a human being ‘incomplete’ without the creation of a self. Let’s say a baby is born, isolated and only
provided food until approximately the age of five, and then immediately placed into the wild where, instead of dying, it adapts and is able to survive amongst other animals. In the wild, the brain does not have access to words or deeds from which it can spin the “web of discourses” (Dennett 416). It would rely on animalistic instinct and any information it can glean from the behavior of other animals. Following Dennett’s claim, this individual would be ‘incomplete’. In this case, it seems that we would be using the word ‘incomplete’ to mean ‘different’. As long as the individual can survive autonomously, it would appear that a ‘self’ is unnecessary. It feels wrong and somewhat misleading to regard this individual as ‘incomplete’ simply because they do not fit our typical social understanding of a human.

Dennett’s response to this would be his catch-all phrase for any hypothetical situations/possibilities that are posed against him- “There could be, I suppose, but there aren’t — so my theory doesn’t have to explain them.” (Dennett 426). My thought experiment though, is based in reality. The subject of this phenomenon has been referred to as the ‘feral child’ (“Feral Child” n.d.), they are typically isolated from human contact from a young age, lacking any social abilities or any concept of language. There have been several documented cases. We should still consider these individuals ‘complete’ human beings. Lacking social abilities should not make someone ‘incomplete’; you would not (I hope) call someone diagnosed with Asperger’s ‘incomplete’.

Center of Narrative Gravity

For Dennett, “Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is...concocting and controlling the story we tell others—and ourselves— about who we are. … we do not consciously and deliberately figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them.” (Dennett 418). This seems almost intuitively paradoxical. How can we ‘control the story we tell
others’ and yet ‘not consciously figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them”? Either we can never succeed at controlling the stories we tell, or somehow his use of narrative and story differ in this context. There is a distinction that could be made that might help clear up the difference, if one is intended: there are actions undertaken by the brain which can be associated with the unconscious, and those undertaken by our mind, or our consciousness. The narrative is what your brain tells you, the story is what you tell other people. However, if both words are referring to the same idea, I suggest he get rid of the part about not deliberately figuring out what narratives to tell. All narratives are presentations even when there is no audience.

Humans tend to “posit a center of narrative gravity for a narrative-spinning human body.” (Dennett 418). It can be easy to associate this with his conception of the self (Dennett himself does it a few times) but it is merely a tool in its formation. Here it is useful to make a clear definitional distinction between three major terms: the existence of a human being, the existence of a person and the existence of a self. A human being is “... a culture-bearing primate classified in the genus Homo, especially the species H. sapiens.”, i.e. a biological organism. Personhood is a center of narrative gravity, a narrator i.e. any entity with the capacity for self-awareness. A self is the content of said narration, the story being told. In establishing this correlation, it becomes clear that this ‘spatio-temporal location’ is just another way of binding identity to a physical body, while narrowly avoiding the consistency of biological changes that make such an argument implausible. Therefore, his theory has an established undercurrent of persistence (not of the self, but of the person). Dennett uses ‘selves’ and ‘persons’ interchangeably but replacing his use of

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the word ‘body’ with ‘person’ allows for a more accurate conception, since a body can change drastically while retaining the same center of narrative gravity.

The All or Nothing of Selves

As far as the particular narratives go, the “distinctness of different narratives is the life-blood of different selves” (Dennett 425). This allows for one body to house multiple selves as in the case of Multiple Personality Disorder, as well as the possibility of a self to “go out of existence” (Dennett 423). Dennett haphazardly throws around concepts such as a “fully-fledged self” (Dennett 426) and “quasi-selves” (Dennett 422). While discussing the effects of the split-brain procedure on selves, he mentions “the conditions for accumulating the sort of narrative richness that constitutes a ‘fully fledged’ self are not present” (Dennett 426). What exactly are these conditions? What qualifies as narrative richness? What else constitutes a ‘fully-fledged’ self? The answer to these questions might point us in the direction of a possible answer to a larger question: What narrative changes warrant the birth of a new self?

My View

By slightly altering, and then fusing the ideas of Daniel Dennett and Derek Parfit, we can extract a holistic account of the self- what it is, and what it takes for one to remain in existence over time. This view discards the outdated need to cling to identity as a fixed aspect of human beings’ existence.
momentum that accrues to the trajectory of a self...is the stability imparted to it by the web of beliefs that constitute it, and when those beliefs lapse, it lapses, either permanently or temporarily.” (Dennett 423)

A Center of Narrative Gravity is merely an approximation. This is because all things or objects can only ever be approximations-

“What is a chair? Well, a chair is a certain thing over there...certain?, how certain? The atoms are evaporating from it from time to time--not many atoms, but a few--dirt falls on it and gets dissolved in the paint; so to define a chair precisely, to say exactly which atoms are chair, and which atoms are air, or which atoms are dirt, or which atoms are paint that belongs to the chair is impossible. So the mass of a chair can be defined only approximately. In the same way, to define the mass of a single object is impossible, because there are not any single, left-alone objects in the world.” --Richard Feynman, Lectures on Physics, Vol.1

Imagine that you, right now, are the crest of a wave. You are Self 1, your brain a generative Center of Narrative Gravity, along with a myriad of attributions and interpretations (psychological features). These include but are not limited to likes, dislikes, behaviors, beliefs, and everything else that’s been attributed to you over the course of your lifetime. Your self-
report is *indistinguishable from* your narrative. Just as the narrative is constantly changing and evolving, so will your self-report. Your brain, “acting in concert over the years with…parents and siblings and friends” (Dennett 429) creates the autobiographical fiction that is your ‘narrative’.

**Degrees**

“If you think of yourself as a center of narrative gravity…your existence depends on the persistence of that narrative…” (Dennett 430)

Dennett views the narrative created by the brain as a constant process analogous to that of writing a novel. This can be equated with our unconscious/subconscious. It includes every experience and attribute that managed to make it into long term memory or are lying dormant in some recess of the brain. Our Self-Representations/Stories on the other hand, are very much our conscious reading of the narrative- presentational by nature and intentional in content. We can only recollect about one chapter at a time, and thus the story fluctuates a great deal over the course of a life. Consciously as new chapters are added, old ones being to fall off. These bundles are made of all of our psychological features/attributes. A self can be considered to remain in existence only to the degree that this story is the same, and direct psychological relations hold. Self 1 and Self 2 maintain similarities where the waves overlap. This overlap means that there are shared psychological features, or a very similar story being told; no overlap would mean those features are unique to that self and an entirely different story has come about. This is demonstrated on the graph by Self 1 and Self 4. The end of a self alone does not end our existence when it is succeeded by another self.
When we speak of ourselves first-personally using the word ‘I’, we speak of the self to which we maintain the highest degree of psychological connectedness- the green dot on diagram I. Since this connectedness is a matter of degree, the drawing of these distinctions can be left to the choice of the speaker and be allowed to vary from context to context (Parfit 1987, p.218). In a persistent vegetative state, the brain is able to keep the body alive, but it cannot support any psychological features. At this time there is no self, yet there is the chance a new self could emerge should the brain regain consciousness.

Am I the same person?

Relatively. If the Center of Narrative Gravity remains the same and does not diminish or split. Here my view is consistent with Parfits- “If I say, ‘It will not be me, but one of my future selves,’ I do not imply that I will be that future self. He is one of my later selves, and I am one of his earlier selves. There is no underlying person who we both are.” (Parfit 1987, p.219). This use of person refers to the typical use- that is having some characteristic. My interpretation of Dennett’s use is simply for the purpose of designating a spatio-temporal entity. The requirement for personhood is generally the capacity for self-awareness (awareness of the self)- but I think adding the ability to self-report is necessary to avoid some theoretical pitfalls. The requirements for a self is a certain set of psychological features/attributions/interpretations composed into an autobiography of the Center of Narrative Gravity. Furthermore, the existence of a person does not necessitate the existence of a self while a self-necessitates the existence of a person.

As human beings, our psychological features and awareness of them are constantly in flux. Some aspects of ourselves may have remained unchanged, but the addition of new experiences and interactions results in a new story and therefore a different self. There is no real
need to insist that a being is the same over time. It actually makes a great deal of intuitive sense to view life as a sort of evolution. As humans, we value growth and adaptation. This is why we are not expected to keep promises we made when we were 10 at the age of 35 and why we feel the need to re-acquaint ourselves with people whom we have lost contact with.

**How is this different from Dennett and Parfit’s definition?**

Psychological continuity says that I am the same person that I was when I was 5 years old if and only if I maintain an overlapping, continuous chain of psychological relations. This relation is transitive. The main problem I have with this theory is the question of whom is taking note of the chain? As far as psychological continuity goes, you *cannot* meet the requirement without being aware you meet it. This is in opposition to cases where you could meet the requirement ‘she is asleep,’ or the requirement ‘is not aware of the person behind her’ without being aware of it because in those cases there is an external third party available to inform you of things you may not be aware of, whereas in the case of psychological relations, only the center of narrative gravity to whom they belong can attest to their existence.

In order to avoid memory circularity problems psychological continuity theorists expanded the criteria to include any psychological feature. So, if all of my memories suddenly become inaccessible to me, these theorists would speculate that I am still the same person because I share other psychological features with a past self. This is an assumption founded in spatio-temporal continuity and can only be assessed externally. If I have no memories, then I do not know whether or not I share *any* psychological features with a past self. Furthermore, in order for this claim to be objectively evaluated *someone would have to know me*. To compare pre-memory loss self to post-memory loss self there would need to be a person who is aware of
most of my psychological features. What happens if no one knows me? It cannot be assumed that I share any psychological features with a prior self. I also do not enlist quasi-memories as Parfit does in order to avoid the memory circularity objection to psychological continuity.

The most common quarrels with Dennett’s theory surround his vocabulary. For example, his use of biological self, the lack of clear distinction between story and narrative, and his interchanging of self and person. Like Parfit, his definition of the self is also bound to a spatio-temporal constant- a person, but this one is entirely socially contingent and serves the purpose of allowing other people to assign you an identity. He also suggests that the formation of a self is, for the most part, a natural occurrence; which is drawn from Richard Dawkins concept of the extended phenotype. This concept effectively opens up the stage to invite the external world (such as society) to have a stake in evolution. I disagree with him on his use of the word ‘natural’. The definition of natural is “existing in or caused by nature; not made or caused by people.”3 It only appears natural because of human beings' ability to adapt. The self is a conditioned response to our environment. With that said, this can be the only basis for any type of persistence, because it acknowledges its roots in society and exists as an abstract fiction.

Why is this better?

My definition of psychological connectedness is non-branching and it is not transitive. That is to say, a self cannot split- it may only be recreated, duplicated, or destroyed. Two halves of oneself would actually be two different selves because they would not consist of the same set of psychological features. Non-transitive means that Self 4 can be psychologically connected to

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Self 3, and Self 3 to Self 1, without implying that Self 4 is connected to Self 1 (Diagram 1). Psychological continuity theorists claim that you remain the same person over the course of your lifetime (in so far as the chain holds), which logically means that you can be held morally accountable for things a much earlier self did. If you are 20 and you are ‘the same person you were when you were 10’ (because you are psychologically continuous with that person) then promises you made are still valid; and if I knew you when you were 10 but then you moved to another country and we completely stopped communicating, it would be safe to say that I know you now. It should be clear that this is absurd and not something many people intuitively believe- no one expects you to uphold your childhood belief system nor would someone claim to know you after years without contact. While you might consider yourself the ‘same person’ you most certainly would not be the same person to me. The infinite number of variables occurring in the world can and do change us in fundamental ways. My theory allows for radical growth, self-reinvention, and significantly more practical autonomy since the degrees aspect encourages periodic internal evaluations of our psychological features.

**Fission**

A common problem for the psychological continuity theory is the fission thought experiment. If we were able to transplant one of the hemispheres of your brain into an empty skull- there would now be two human beings who are psychologically continuous with your former self. Since the word ‘you’ is singular, there cannot be two beings that are at the same time ‘you’. This has been remedied by adding the phrase “and no other being is”- as in “a past or future person is you only if they are psychologically continuous with you and no other being is”. At first glance this seems
to solve the problem; yet it still does not make intuitive sense. The result of this new contingency is that ‘you’ would survive if one of your hemispheres were destroyed but you would cease to exist if a hemisphere were to be transplanted into another being. Psychological connectedness does not allow for a person to continue existing after fission because the two resulting people would not share the same narrative center of gravity- one person goes out of existence and two new persons result, despite having the exact same set of psychological features. These selves are only identical when the new brain is uploaded with the original person’s psychological features.

After that, both resulting persons would have their own perspective and autonomy. There are cases where people can lead perfectly normal lives with only part of the brain. So theoretically we can create as many selves as we can split the brain. What matters in survival is completely subjective to the self. It is the responsibility of the self to decide what matters to it in survival and inform loved ones in case of disaster. Survival does not necessitate identity, and numerical sameness is irrelevant. This is similar to Parfit’s conclusion of the Wiggins and Teletransporter thought experiments- that aspects of ‘you’ (psychological features) can survive as two persons without suggesting that you are two people.

**Implications:**
If I am no longer the same person, how can I be held responsible?

Personal responsibility does not require personal identity. By choosing to live in a society and accepting the terms of the social contract, you acknowledge and abide by the morals of your contemporaries. Our current justice system adheres to physio-spatial continuity; if your body did it, your body will be held responsible for it. Of course there are cases where one can plead insanity or have a mental condition that is relevant to the situation, which would result in a reduced punishment; however, simply saying ‘I am a different self than the self who committed those actions’ is not likely to go over well in a court of law. Knowing this, we can make decisions now taking into account the possible consequences future selves will suffer that may be psychologically connected to me. Retrospectively, if ‘you’ committed a crime or wrongdoing, morally you should only feel guilty or responsible in so much as those selves are connected. For example, say I am Self 4. Self 1 tripped a student on the playground at recess. There is no reason that Self 4 should feel bad about this action, doing so would imply that there is some direct psychological relation between those selves. This unburdening allows for each self to be more productive and prosperous.

What happens to commitments and promises?

The sense of security that we get from commitment is and always has been a delusion. In a paper written by Daniel E. Palmer he claims that psychological connectedness “seriously undermines any substantial notion of moral commitment”, in order to demonstrate this he uses a thought experiment that reads as follows: “Suppose I am a struggling artist, unsure of my own abilities, despondent over my situation, and almost ready to end it all. However, just as I am about to throw myself off the bridge an extremely wealthy investor comes upon me. Taking pity
upon me, he offers to use his wealth and influence in order to help my career and to make a name
for myself in the more prominent art circles. In exchange, he only asks that if he is ever in need
of a favor that I promise to help him as well. Due to his patronage, I eventually become an
extremely successful artist. My works fetch outlandish prices and my presence commands the
respect and admiration of high society. However, my patron does not fare so well over the years.
Unscrupulous employees bring about his financial ruin, and he is eventually reduced to tatters,
living on the streets from hand to mouth. One day while walking with friends in the park, my
former patron sees me and asks me to remain true to my former promise to help him if he should
ever need it. We would all, I believe, think it morally repugnant of the me to refuse to honor my
commitment. However, on Parfit’s account there are two reasons for thinking that this will not be
the case. First, the successful and wealthy artist that I have become is surely very weakly
Related to that starving and despondent wreck who was about to kill himself so many years ago.
Likewise, the decrepit tramp before me now bears little continuity to the commanding and
prosperous investor that I made my promise to on that day. Thus, on Parfit’s we could reasonably
claim that neither myself nor my former patron are the same selves as those involved in the
establishment of the commitment. I thus have no special moral obligation to the person before
me.” …Correct! Another person’s morals can only be assessed through the lens of your own.
Morality is not universal; everyone adheres to their own personal moral code. You should not
and cannot expect that people will keep their word, especially when you know nothing about that
person. This is why we have contracts that are legally binding. Even if it was a different self that
signed the contract, a court of law will hold your current self-accountable, so out of pure self-interest you would want to fulfill the terms of the contract regardless of your moral leanings. In
addition, you should not need the fact that there was a promise made in order to do what you
believe is the right thing. Morality is unaffected by psychological connectedness. If the artist chooses not to repay the man, no one else can rightfully consider it morally repugnant because there is a significant amount of information missing in the time gap that could have reasonably influenced the artist's decision. All promises have an expiration date - they die along with the self that made them. Deep down each of us knows this but allow ourselves to live in the lie of commitment for the sake of temporary happiness.

**Conclusion**

I have tried to mold a coherent image of the self out of the theories presented by Daniel Dennett and Derek Parfit. By developing Parfit’s ideas of psychological connectedness I show that the continued existence of a self can come in degrees and making slight adjustments to Dennett’s definition of selves as stories we consciously construct and present to others (founded on the unconscious narrative that works as its bedrock). I concede that the topics addressed in this paper are far reaching and require additional argumentation that I am not able to fit into this particular work. My intention was to lay out the groundwork for an overhaul of our current conception of the self and address some of the implications it will have on the way we live, including the societal ramifications.
Works Cited


