

Personal Identity Dilemma Revisited: A Philosophic and Psychiatric Approach

Fanou Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*Loomis Chaffee School, 4 Batchelder Rd, Winrtisor, CT 06095, United States*

a. Fanou_zhang@loomis.org

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In a dynamic environment characterised by constant change, how do the mutable aspects of people's identity contribute to its preservation? Can an individual's personal identity be comprehensively explicated just via the examination of either their unchanging or evolving elements? The aforementioned concerns exhibit interconnections with the perplexing task of ascertaining the identity equivalence between oneself and another individual. Despite experiencing various physical and psychological transformations, people maintain a consistent self-perception and are seen by others in a similar manner. This article aims to examine the topic of personal identity, proposing an analytical approach that focuses on two distinct dimensions: an individual's enduring attributes and their evolving traits. The genetic constitution and specific physical attributes of an individual are illustrative of the static elements that are seen to be inherent components of a person.

Keywords: personal identity, dissociative identity disorder, individuality

1. Introduction

The idea of a person's identity is difficult to pin down since every person has aspects that are constant but also undergo consistent changes throughout the course of their lives. In order to evaluate it, this study will use them to answer the following three supplementary questions: What fixed aspects of one's identity continue to be the same from infancy into adulthood? In a world where everything is always changing, how can the parts of people's identity that are dynamic help to keep it the same? Can one's personal identity be fully explained by either their static or dynamic components alone? All of these issues are interconnected with the conundrum of determining whether or not person A and B are the same person. Even though individuals go through both physical and mental changes, they continue to see themselves as the same person and are seen by others the same way. This article is going to discuss the issue of personal identity and suggest that it may be analysed by concentrating on two different aspects: a person's static characteristics and their dynamic qualities. A person's genetic make-up and certain physical characteristics are examples of the kinds of aspects that are considered to be static components of a person. A person's ideas, memories, and experiences are examples of dynamic components since these parts of a person are prone to alter or evolve through time [1-3].

Examples of static variables that are an essential part of what is a person's identity and do not change are people's genetic make-up as well as the way that people express themselves physically. Both of these aspects of ourselves are determined by genes [4]. Personalities, degrees of

consciousness, and memories are the aspects of lives that are most open to change. Other aspects of people's lives are less amenable to transformation. In spite of the fact that they are only present for a short period of time, each of these aspects plays a role in the development of a person's personality. It is going to be claimed that the construction of a coherent identity is the result of a dynamic interaction between the fixed and fluid components of a person's personality. This is because the formation of a coherent identity is the result of a cohesive identity [5]. Static features allow people to maintain essential self-identity even as they evolve and age, while dynamic characteristics enable them to expand and develop with time [6]. In spite of the fact that people are always developing, they are able to keep their identities consistent over the course of their lives because to the interaction between those components that are unchanging and those that are subject to change [7, 8]. The ability of a person to maintain their sense of identity during the course of their lifetime cannot be effectively explained by either of these qualities on their own.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Static Components vs. Dynamic Components

Certain aspects of who people are tend to stay the same throughout an individual's life. These static aspects are distinguished by their stability and serve as touchstones against which to measure the development of identity's dynamic facets. Static components of identity are significantly more enduring since they may be reduced to the deeper physical domain of bodies, even if there are reasonably stable parts of social and psychological identity. In public settings, physical appearance is more important than one's intellect or sense of one's own identity. Personality may be proven to be intricately linked to hereditary characteristics even at the psychological level. Since the time of conception, genetic heritage has been a continual part of identity, functioning as the foundation of physical, psychological, and social selves [8].

Those facets of what people are that are malleable and changeable throughout time are of personal identity. These elements are ever-changing since they are shaped by people's responses to new information and encounters. Dynamic parts are more adaptable than their static counterparts since they are affected by both internal and external forces [9]. The living aspect of What human identity are consists of innermost thoughts, present-day awareness, and past experiences. Beliefs, information, abilities, connections, and functions all come under one umbrella.

According to the fully static theory of identity, What human identity are is defined entirely by genes and never changes [9]. For instance, those who hold this position may argue that a person's immutable genetic makeup means that they are still the same person even after undergoing gender reassignment surgery. This perspective ignores the dynamic changes that occur inside a person, both physically and mentally, throughout such a shift in favour of a static concentration on aspects of people's identities. Identities are not just based on static components, but are also profoundly impacted by dynamic variables, as seen by the profound shift in this person's sense of self, their social role, and their relationships with others.

A contrasting view, the simply dynamic account of identity, holds that people's sense of self is not static but rather is dynamically modified by experiences, relationships, and shifting beliefs and wants. Here, one's sense of self is seen as a tale or narrative that is always being written and rewritten. Nonetheless, there seems to be problems with this viewpoint as well. Take the extreme case of complete amnesia; the purely dynamic explanation may suggest that the person's identity has been erased if they lose all of their memories. But even under the direst of circumstances, certain fundamental components of one's personality would endure. Muscle memory, acquired expertise, and routines are all examples. The whole feeling of self that underlying a person's identity cannot be explained by the solely dynamic narrative explanation.

2.2. Possible Critiques

Paul Ricoeur's narrative identity theory presents a possible rebuttal to the importance of fixed characteristics in one's sense of self [10]. According to Ricoeur's book, *Oneself as Another*, people build their sense of what human identity are by telling stories about ourselves [11]. According to this view, the self is not something fixed or fixed through time, but rather something that is constantly produced and reconstructed via the tales people talk about ourselves. In Ricoeur's narrative identity theory, language plays a central role since it is assumed that primary means of constructing people's identities are the tales, people tell about ourselves [10].

While Ricoeur's theory sheds light on the dynamic aspects of What human identity are, it fails to give sufficient weight to the more immutable aspects of What human identity are [10]. In 2022, Nancy L. Segal and Yoon-Mi Hur did research on monozygotic twins who were nurtured apart and immersed in two entirely different cultures: South Korea and the United States. The research revealed "similarities... evident in personality, self-esteem, mental health, and job satisfaction," despite obvious variations in culture, story, and language [12].

Despite the importance of story in forming What human identity are, this research reveals that it is insufficient on its own. Personality characteristics and worldviews are heavily influenced by genetic composition and other fixed aspects of people's identities. This holds true regardless of the languages people use or the stories they tell.

2.3. Locke on Remembrance and Individuality

Famously, English philosopher John Locke devotes Chapter 27 of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* to the topic of memory and its impact on one's sense of self. According to Locke, oneself is inextricably linked to their conscious memories [13]. If A recalls being B, then A is the same person as B, according to Locke's theory. In a sense, Locke's thesis assumes that a person's identity is limited to what can be remembered about them. The Lockean explanation is challenged, however, by the frailty and transience of memory. Surely one's sense of self is not as fleeting as a forgotten past. The "Brave Officer Paradox" presented by Thomas Reid illustrates some of the flaws in Locke's thesis. When A recalls being B, and B remembers being C, but A does not remember being C, it would have Reid's dilemma. According to Locke's theory and the transitivity of identity, A is the same as C. Since A cannot recall ever having been C, A cannot be the same person, according to the Lockean memory concept of personal identity. In an effort to disprove Locke's thesis that memory alteration destroys the transitive quality of self-relation, Reid presents the following argument.

Despite Reid's objections, Locke's centrality of memory to the concept of self-identity should not be overlooked. Instead, it should be rethought in terms of fluid aspects of one's identity. Locke argues that the concept of self relies heavily on the continuity of awareness via recollection. Memory may be imperfect and fleeting, but that doesn't lessen its importance in moulding who to become as individuals. Instead, people will see how memory is always changing. There is no such thing as a single, unchanging memory; rather, memories work together, building on one another and influencing one another. Because of the cumulative and ever-evolving character of memory, people are able to maintain the sense of selves despite the ever-present forces of change.

This idea of memory and identity as being in a constant state of flux is supported by studies in psychology. Autobiographical memory, or the remembering of personal events, is not, according to the theory put forward by Conway and Pearce, a fixed storehouse of unchangeable fragments of the past. Instead, it does the opposite, actively building and reconstructing memories in line with the present sense of identity and aspirations [14]. Our identities develop and change throughout time in part because of the constant building and re-building of memories.

3. Case Studies and Theory Applications

These real-life situations, where identity is challenged or transformed, ground theoretical discussions, enabling people to gauge the practical applicability and depth of philosophical theories. Extreme cases offer unique windows into the interplay of static and dynamic components of personal identity. They highlight scenarios where one or both aspects are compromised or altered. In understanding these cases through the lens of static and dynamic identity, people can pinpoint how foundational aspects intertwine with evolving experiences to craft an individual's sense of self.

3.1. Phineas Gage

Phineas Gage, a 19th-century American railroad construction foreman, experienced a life-changing incident in 1848 when a tamping iron accidentally penetrated his skull. This accident severely damaged his frontal lobe, which astonishingly he survived. However, while his physical recovery was remarkable, the most fascinating aftermath of the incident was the pronounced change in his personality and behavior [15].

Before the accident, Gage was described as a well-mannered, responsible, and hard-working individual. However, post-accident, his behavior shifted dramatically. He became irritable, impulsive, and unreliable, and was often described as having lost his sense of social decorum. The once core components of his identity seemed to have altered.

If there is a need to apply a purely static interpretation, people might be inclined to claim that since Gage's genetic makeup remained unchanged, he was, in essence, still the same person. However, his behavioral alterations challenge such a simplistic view. While his biological static component (his genetic blueprint) remained the same, the injury shifted another static component: the structure and function of his brain, which is closely tied to personality. On the other hand, when it is the chance to solely focus on the dynamic components, people might conclude that the Gage post-accident was entirely a different person, since his interactions, experiences, and memories from that point onward were likely influenced by the changes in his brain.

However, the proposed integrated perspective on identity offers a more nuanced interpretation. Gage's foundational static component (his genetics) remained unchanged, but a shift occurred in the static component of his brain's physical structure, which in turn influenced the dynamic aspects of his identity, like behavior and experiences. This case highlights how the static and dynamic components of identity do not exist separately but shape and influence each other in profound ways.

3.2. Clive Wearing

Clive Wearing, a renowned British musician and musicologist, has an interesting case of personal identity due to his struggle with severe amnesia caused by viral encephalitis. The damage was largely concentrated on his hippocampus, a region essential for forming new memories, causing him to lose virtually all episodic memory—the ability to recall personal experiences. Every few seconds, wearing feels as though he is “waking up” for the first time, making his conscious experience akin to a perpetual present. Yet not all was lost. His semantic memory—knowledge of facts and concepts, and procedural memory—like how to play the piano, remained intact. He could still read music, play the piano, and even conduct choirs with the same prowess he had before the illness [16].

In light of the proposed framework, Clive Wearing's condition challenges the conventional notions of identity, particularly in relation to the role of memory. Locke's concept of memory as the foundation of personal identity would argue that Wearing's sense of self is persistently disrupted, as his continuity of consciousness is severely fragmented. However, this doesn't necessarily imply the total dissolution of Wearing's identity. His residual musical abilities and fragments of semantic memory, for instance, serve as static components that defy his otherwise fragmented state of

consciousness. Wearing's retained musical ability can be seen as a static component of his identity. This aspect of him has remained constant, regardless of his inability to form new memories or recognize his own life story.

In Wearing's case, people will find that the static components of his identity, such as his innate musical talents, persist irrespective of his compromised dynamic faculties. His identity, although severely altered, has not been completely erased. Wearing's case serves as empirical evidence against the idea that continuous memory is a *sine qua non* for a continuous personal identity. While memory undeniably shapes the dynamic identity, the case of Clive Wearing suggests that a lack of continuous memory does not entirely annihilate one's identity. Static components can carry enough weight to provide a sense of self, albeit a limited one.

4. Extended Discussion: Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)

Consider for a moment the complete transplantation of Person A's brain into Person B's body, and conversely, Person B's brain into Person A's body. The dilemma that arises from such a scenario is both fascinating and perplexing. Would Person A, now with Person B's body, retain the identity of A due to the brain's memories, thoughts, and mental processes? Or would the identity be significantly influenced, or even dominated, by Person B's body with its innate physiological predispositions and genetic determinants? The very posing of this question challenges the delineations people have set for personal identity.

This hypothetical, though distant from the current medical capabilities, has many parallels with a real-world phenomenon that bears similarities in its challenges to the understanding of identity: Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Individuals diagnosed with DID experience multiple, distinct identity states or personalities, often termed "alters." Each alter may have its own name, age, gender, memories, and even physical characteristics. For the individual with DID, these alters can take control of the person's behavior and consciousness, oftentimes without memory of the other alters' actions. This phenomenon, in essence, mirrors the brain exchange scenario but within the confines of a single physical entity.

5. The Role of Heredity in Psychiatric Disorders

The study of identical twins has provided evidence that illustrates the significance of biological factors in the development of uniqueness. Since 1979, Thomas J. Bouchard and his fellow researchers at the University of Minnesota have been investigating the factors that lead to the development of distinct abilities, personalities, interests, and social attitudes in over one hundred pairs of reared-apart twins or triplets. When identical (monozygotic) twins are reared apart, "about 70% of the variance in IQ was found to be associated with genetic variation."

As a consequence of this, people may be able to arrive at the following conclusion: in spite of the myriad of various environmental influences and experiences, the genetic composition that people inherited plays a significant role in the construction of the particular personalities and traits, and this role extends beyond only the physical qualities. This aspect of one's identity that is fixed provides a foundational platform for other aspects of one's identity that are more dynamic and are more immediately influenced by the environment in which they find themselves. These fluid facets of identity are more prone to undergo transformation throughout the course of time.

As is well-known, a person's unique genetic sequence is also responsible for their constant, defining physical traits that underpin all the ways their bodies evolve through time. While things like eye colour, fingerprints, and face shape (basically one's physical physique) may seem inconsequential, they really have a significant effect in how people feel about themselves.

Bernard Williams conducts a thought experiment in his paper *The Self and the Future* to demonstrate that people connect more strongly with the physical body than is often believed [14]. William's argument rests on the following key assumption. Pretend a crazy scientist has abducted you. You are then informed that tomorrow you would be tormented by this insane scientist. You're petrified by this development. He continues, "But at the time of the torture, all of your memories and psychological traits will be ripped out of your head and implanted in person B," with the implication that your existing memories and attributes would be replaced by those of person B. Williams points out that the scientist's new insight won't do much to calm your nerves about being tortured tomorrow. This leads him to the conclusion that identity is inextricably linked to bodily existence. Through this hypothetical scenario, people are reminded of the importance of the physical appearance as a fixed aspect of people's identities.

Using the lens of the proposed conception of identity, the static component, in this context, is the individual's physical body, remaining consistent regardless of which alter is dominant. However, the dynamic components fluctuate immensely between the alters, each bringing forward different memories, emotions, behaviors, and even skills. Yet, despite these shifts in dynamic identity, the static body remains a consistent vessel. This body carries with it a genetic code, predispositions, and inherent traits that, in a more subdued manner, may influence each alter. For instance, a genetic predisposition to a certain illness would affect all alters, even if only one alter recognizes or acknowledges it.

While one might argue that the dynamic shifts in personality and memory seen in DID take precedence in determining identity, the enduring nature of the static body provides a consistent anchor. Furthermore, if multiple identities can coexist within the same static framework, it highlights the vastness and adaptability of dynamic components. It reinforces the idea that while static traits provide a foundational anchor, it is the dynamic elements, with their fluidity and changeability, that play a major role in day-to-day sense of self.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, people are the same person as they were when they were ten in the sense that people retain a static core to identity founded primarily on biological components. Simultaneously, the dynamic components of identity, shaped by evolving consciousness and memory, inform the process of growth and change that occurs throughout whole life. Neither purely static nor purely dynamic accounts can fully account for the complexity of personal identity. Instead, an integrated perspective acknowledges the significant influence of both in forming human being's continuous and evolving sense of self.

References

- [1] Bouchard Jr, T. J., Lykken, D. T., McGue, M., Segal, N. L., & Tellegen, A. (1990). *Sources of human psychological differences: The Minnesota study of twins reared apart*. *Science*, 250(4978), 223-228.
- [2] Beckwith, J., Geller, L., & Sarkar, S. (1991). "Sources of human psychological differences: The Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart": Comment.
- [3] Newman, D. L., Tellegen, A., & Bouchard Jr, T. J. (1998). *Individual differences in adult ego development: sources of influence in twins reared apart*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(4), 985.
- [4] Waller, N. G., Kojetin, B. A., Bouchard Jr, T. J., Lykken, D. T., & Tellegen, A. (1990). *Genetic and environmental influences on religious interests, attitudes, and values: A study of twins reared apart and together*. *Psychological science*, 1(2), 138-142.
- [5] Lykken, D. T. (2006). *The mechanism of emergence*. *Genes, Brain and Behavior*, 5(4), 306-310.
- [6] Lykken, D. T. Bouchard, T.J., Jr., Lykken, D.T., McGue, M., Segal, N.L., & Tellegen, A. (1990, October 12). *The sources of human psychological differences: The Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart*. *Science*, 250, 223-228.
- [7] Lykken, D.T. (1957). *A study of anxiety*. *Psychology*, 55, 6-10.

- [8] Segal, N. L., & Stohs, J. H. (2007). *Resemblance for age at menarche in female twins reared apart and together. Human Biology*, 79(6), 623-635.
- [9] Schwartz, S. J., Klimstra, T. A., Luyckx, K., Hale III, W. W., Frijns, T., Oosterwegel, A., ... & Meeus, W. H. (2011). *Daily dynamics of personal identity and self-concept clarity. European Journal of Personality*, 25(5), 373-385.
- [10] Ricoeur, P. (1991). *A Ricoeur reader: Reflection and imagination. University of Toronto Press*.
- [11] Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as Another. 1990. Trans. Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press*.
- [12] Segal, N. L., & Hur, Y. M. (2022). *Personality traits, mental abilities and other individual differences: Monozygotic female twins raised apart in South Korea and the United States. Personality and Individual Differences*, 194, 111643.
- [13] Locke, J. (1847). *An essay concerning human understanding. Kay & Troutman*.
- [14] Conway, M. A. (2005). *Memory and the self. Journal of memory and language*, 53(4), 594-628.
- [15] Ratiu, P., Talos, I. F., Haker, S., Lieberman, D., & Everett, P. (2004). *The tale of Phineas Gage, digitally remastered. Journal of neurotrauma*, 21(5), 637-643.
- [16] Wilson, B. A., & Wearing, D. (1995). *Prisoner of consciousness: A state of just awakening following herpes simplex encephalitis*.