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Spatio-temporal Continuity and Personhood: An Analysis of the Diachronicity of Identity Through Two Criterions

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Abstract: The concept of and continuity of personal identity has long fascinated philosophers, psychologists, and individuals alike. This essay explores the continuity of the self from childhood onwards, examining how fundamental characteristics, memories, and experiences contribute to the persistence of personal identity through the dualist theory of the mind and body. In this view, a person is the same person as an earlier person if they have the same form as the earlier person and have continuity of matter with them. This essay will assert that human essence, through Olson's animalism, remains the same and that the enduring connections formed through memories, values, and self-perception, however unreliable, may contribute to a sense of sameness, with the final determination of sameness belonging to the person whose personhood is put to question.

Keywords: animalism, personhood, Lockean theory, diachronicity, cognition

1. Introduction

This essay will contend that, according to Olson's animalism, human essence is unchanged and that, despite their unreliability, the lasting connections created by memories, values, and self-perception may contribute to a sense of sameness, with the person whose personhood is in question making the final determination of sameness.

2. Definition of Personhood

One compelling perspective in the philosophical exploration of personhood is Olson's animalism, which offers valuable insights into the nature of personal identity. According to this view, human beings are both persons and animals; identity is intimately connected to animal essence. Olson's animalism suggests that the human being, in its physical and biological form, represents the enduring "essence" that remains constant throughout an individual's life [1]. Olson's work highlights the concept of physical continuity as a minimal requirement for personhood. Still, it does not guarantee the presence of personhood itself. Physical continuity refers to the uninterrupted chain of material existence, where a person's body remains connected over time. Central to Olson's ideas is the notion that the lack of persistence in psychological functions can impact the continuity of personhood while leaving the corporeal and biological criteria unaffected. With this understanding, it can be argued that all persons are human beings, but not all humans are persons, with personhood being a sortal phase of complex psychology.

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3. The Criteria of the Continuity of Personhood

3.1. The Corporeal Criterion

The most available evidence for personal diachronicity often comes from analyzing the conditions required for the spatiotemporal continuity of the body. Consider the scenario of losing an arm. From an animalistic perspective, although the physical body has changed, the remaining body still constitutes the same individual. Even if there are significant impairments in cognitive functions or the ability to express oneself, the underlying biological continuity of being a human organism is believed to sustain personhood. Olson's work emphasizes that the lack of persistence in psychological functions can compromise personhood continuity. While corporeal and biological criteria might remain uninterrupted, the transient nature of psychological attributes, such as memories, personality traits, and consciousness, can challenge the overall continuity of personhood. However, how does one know they are in the same sortal phase, i.e., the same person? Understanding the nature of continuity requires delving into the replacement dynamics and the speed at which physical elements are replaced or transformed.

Rapid changes in physical objects, including the body, also significantly influence judgments of diachronicity [2]. This variation in opinion is exemplified by the famous “Ship of Theseus” paradox, where the replacement schedule of planks affects intuition about the ship’s sameness. Gradual replacement of the ship’s planks generally supports the inference that the vessel remains the same. However, if the change is too rapid, one’s certainty of the ship’s continuity is challenged [3].

Various philosophers have observed that not all aspects of the body contribute equally to personal diachronicity [4]. The brain, in particular, holds significant relevance to questions of self-sameness. The importance of the brain in determining personal diachronicity is highlighted by a thought experiment involving brain transplantation. The resulting individual, with one person’s brain in another’s body, raises questions about identity. In the original scenario, Mr. Brown transplants his brain into Mr. Robinson’s body. Philosophers and non-philosophers are asked to reflect on this scenario, “What is the identity of Mr. Brownson?”. The intuition is that the resulting person is often the same as the original brain owner, indicating that specific body parts hold more significance in determining personal sameness. The continuity of the self does not seem to depend on the entire body but rather on the brain itself. The brain, after all, is part of the body that hosts various cognitive functions: memory, personality, mood, thought, and many other psychological faculties. The argument can be made that rather than the persistence of the physical brain itself, the continuity of personally relevant information within that body part is the criterion for sameness.

While it is true that animal essence remains over time due to corporeal continuity, particularly the persistence of the brain, this does not necessarily imply that one remains the same person. While bodily continuity plays a role in understanding human identity, integrating a cognitive criterion allows for the appreciation of the nuanced nature of personal identity and acknowledges the significance of psychological continuity in shaping identity.

3.2. The Cognitive Criterion

John Locke’s concept of the “sameness of consciousness” is that consciousness connects past and present selves, holding that personal identity is a matter of psychological continuity. Mental properties of the self also change, including knowledge, memories, skills, and goals [5][6][7]. However, is this belief justified? Rapid and substantial changes raise doubts about personal continuity, as demonstrated by cases like Phineas Gage, who experienced profound personality changes after a brain injury, which led to the famous documentation by his doctor that he was “no longer Gage.” [8].

Memory, which will be examined as a case study for the cognitive criterion, has long been

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considered a significant aspect of personal and psychological continuity due to its intuitive appeal and extensive scholarly discourse. By scrutinizing the validity of memory as a reliable marker for sameness in personhood, skepticism can be extended to other cognitive factors. Locke considered personal identity, or the self, founded on consciousness (viz. memory), not the substance of the soul or the body. Psychological continuity consists of the holding of several psychological relations between stages of personhood—e.g., relations that hold when beliefs and desires produce, through reasoning, new thoughts, desires, intentions, or decisions—as well as the holding of ties that are involved in the retention over time of personality and character traits. A prominent interpretation of Locke's views goes as follows: A person at one time, P2 at T2, is the same person at an earlier time, P1 at T1, if and only if P2 can remember having done and experienced various things performed by P1 [9]. Thus, the transitivity of episodic memory establishes the continuity of self.

In this analysis, relations of memory make a person the same across time: it is by the memory of past actions that the self attains a sense of continuity. However, there is the issue of circularity and incompatible theses within Locke's account. According to Locke, if a person at a particular time remembers an event from a previous time, they are considered the same person who experienced the event. Conversely, someone who does not retain an event cannot be the same as the person who witnessed or caused the event. Suppose a person at time t(n) remembers an event at time t(1). In that case, the person at time t(n) is identical to the person who was witness to or the agent responsible for the event at time t(1). One fundamental issue is that memories do not always record objective truth. Suppose we encounter a person in the twenty-first century who claims to be Julius Caesar, providing detailed memories of being stabbed on the Ides of March. In this case, the question arises: Can we consider him Caesar simply based on his memory?

The lack of objective truth in his memory challenges its validity as a marker of personal identity. Furthermore, memory itself is inherently falsifiable. Research conducted by Elizabeth Loftus, such as the "Lost in the Mall" technique, demonstrates that false memories can be implanted and accepted as real experiences [10]. Memory recall may also prioritize recent events as we age while fading older memories. For instance, an 80-year-old may remember specific details from when they were 40 but struggle to recall events from when they were 10. This fluidity and selectivity of memory challenge its reliability as a consistent source of personal continuity. Even when memories record objective truth, issues remain because each time we access a memory, it becomes susceptible to modification, influenced by subsequent experiences, emotions, and social influences. This malleability and unreliability further complicate the idea that memory can serve as an unwavering foundation for personal identity. The validity of the conclusions drawn from extreme cases presented in thought experiments is questionable because they often involve unique circumstances and extraordinary conditions that do not mirror the experiences of most individuals.

4. Discussion

Previous analysis shows strong evidence that describing the "self" poses challenges due to its multifaceted nature, and attempting to quantify, measure, or determine sameness proves more difficult [11][12][13][14]. The neuro-cognitive systems of the psycho-physical self, including personal memory, body image, and emotions, can be scientifically studied as they are material and instantiated. However, attempting to draw universal conclusions about personhood based solely on these criteria can be reductionist and, as demonstrated in previous portions of this essay, largely variable. Therefore, the assumption that the above criteria are informative of one's sameness in personhood cannot be proven. The self of first-person subjectivity, the subject experiencing the world, cannot be directly known through perception or introspection [15] [16] [17].

When exploring extreme thought experiments regarding personal identity, it becomes evident that no definitive and universally reliable solution can be derived. The complexities and intricacies of an

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individual's consciousness make it challenging to arrive at a conclusive answer that satisfies all perspectives and scenarios. However, this does not imply that personal identity is entirely incomprehensible on an individual level. While a universally applicable solution may elude us, individuals can develop their understanding and interpretation of personal identity based on their unique experiences and introspection. The subjective nature of personal identity allows for diverse perspectives, each valid in its own right.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, while the human essence remains constant, personhood is complex and nuanced. The cognitive criterion alone is an unreliable marker, prompting a reconsidering of enduring aspects of the subjective weight assigned to the changes that define personhood. Ultimately, individuals have the autonomy to determine their identity, drawing upon their understanding of their human essence and the significance they attribute to the changes that define them.

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