

How important are our memories for our identity?

It is often thought that memory is what gives us all our unique identity. I will discuss the importance of our memories for our identity by comparing different theories of identity—whilst some theories suggest the pivotal importance of memories, others dismiss them as irrelevant. I will argue that even without conclusively settling the debate about what identity is, the role of memories in forming and critiquing these theories can, by an argument from best explanation, be said to be a key part of our identity, and thus our memories are very important for our identity.

However, what is meant by “memories” or “identity”? “Memories” seems easier to define: the recollection or storage of information that we have received; for example remembering playing football as a child. In this essay I will refer exclusively to *episodic* memory, memory of events in one’s personal past.¹

“Identity” is much harder to define. In this essay I will focus on the challenges posed by the problem of “persistence of identity”,² the question of what would entail that x is y , if being x exists at one time and being y at another. Firstly, I take identity to refer to personal identity as opposed to the importance of identity of objects. Therefore, by “our identity”, I am referring to our mental selves as opposed to our physical bodies or brains. For Locke, this meant the identity of our “person”, and it is this general idea of identity which I will henceforth discuss. Here, identity is meant not in the sense of characteristics, but in the sense of the essential quality that makes me “me”. When someone points to a school photo and says “that’s me”, what about the ‘photo “me”’ has been maintained such that ‘current “me”’ is the same as that past “me”. The something which links a present object to a past or future object is **identity**. The question of our identity in this sense³ raises other problems—could “I” exist in another body? If “I” existed as the opposite sex in a parallel universe, would this still be “me”? The answers to these questions rely upon how one explains identity—how one explains the link between ‘photo “me”’ and ‘current “me”’.

Lockean Identity

One of the most intuitive explanations of identity is our memories.⁴ As Klein and Nichols put it;⁵ “Memory for past episodes provides a sense of personal identity – the

¹ See Michaelian, K., Sutton, J. & Zalta, E.N. (ed.) (Summer 2017), “Memory”, in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* for more information about this.

² The question of personal identity questions how we can determine the differences of identities over time, and at what point they start and end. It is this sense which I take the question to mean considering the fact that memories automatically introduce the concept of time and change.

³ It is this sense of identity which I will refer to whenever I use the word “identity” in the essay henceforth.

⁴ I will henceforth refer to this memory theory of identity as “identity₁”.

⁵ This is a quotation from Klein, S.B. & Nichols, S. (2012), “Memory and the Sense of Personal Identity”. See References.

sense that I am the same person as someone in the past.” A person may remember their school days, previous relationships and so on, and this seems to make up an important part of their identity. “School-photo me” and “current me” share our memory of the experience of school teachers and lessons, whereas my friend and I don’t share this same memory. Even if a friend has memories of the exact same teachers and lessons, theirs is from a different point of view; and they have plenty of other memories different from mine. Locke suggested that it is not the soul, but the consciousness which “alone consists personal identity”.⁶ He says that it is this consciousness which “always accompanies thinking, and it is that that makes everyone to be what he calls self”,⁶ suggesting that our individual thoughts are what make us who we are. He gives the example of the Prince who is transported into the body of the cobbler. Locke suggests that since the Prince retains his “princely thoughts”, as Nimbalkar says,⁷ the Prince retains his identity, despite no longer being in his own physical body. For Locke, it was this collection of memories which constituted identity.

Obviously memories are undeniably of vital importance to our identity if our memories constitute our identity. However, take the counter-example of someone who loses their memory, perhaps due to an unfortunate crash or illness.⁸ It becomes clear that identity exists beyond merely memory—if some divine being suddenly erased one single memory from my mind, it seems intuitive that I would not be a different person. Furthermore, the problem becomes logically impossible in the following scenario: a lawyer remembers her school days and therefore has the same identity as her school-child-self; however when she becomes elderly she no longer remembers her school days, although she remembers her time as a lawyer, thus having the same identity as the lawyer, but not as the school-child. This creates the three logically incompatible propositions:

- The school-child and lawyer are one person,
- The lawyer and elderly lady are one person,
- The school-child and elderly lady are different persons.

If x is y and y is z , it is impossible for x and z to have separate identities—as suggested by Locke’s very own law!⁹ Moreover, Joseph Butler said that Locke

⁶ Locke writes: “For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that that makes everyone to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things: in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being” (section ix) in his (1694) *Of Identity and Diversity* in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. See References.

⁷ See Nimbalkar N., *John Locke on Personal Identity* (2011). See References.

⁸ Take for example Alzheimer’s disease, Dementia, False Memory Syndrome and Amnesia, as discussed by Frontino, L. (2010) in her article “*Who am I? An Examination of Memory and Identity*” (see Bibliography). For scientific insights on these matters, see Miller, M.D. & John L. “*Amnesia*”, Caddell, Lisa S. and Clare, L.; “*The impact of dementia on self and identity*” or Flannery, K. “*False Memory Syndrome And The Brain.*” See Bibliography for further information.

⁹ As Helm paraphrases, “Locke holds that an individual thing A existing at a particular time and place is identical with B if A and B are the same kind of thing, and there is a continuous spatio-temporal

presupposes that someone's memories are owned by their identity when he explains that memories constitute identity.¹⁰ When Locke says that the Prince has *his* memories when in the physical body of the cobbler, he has already presupposed that these memories belong to the identity of the Prince... so they can therefore not constitute identity, because these memories belong to the Prince—this creates a cyclical argument. Thus, identity₁ simply cannot work.

However, Helm¹¹ says that Locke could create a slightly more refined view, in which memory is the evidence for the continuity of consciousness (continued identity). Helm argues that memory is not important for our identity, but it is an epistemic ability—memory allows us to know that our consciousness has not changed between T₁ and T₂, but does not actually provide our identity. Helm states that “Memory is a test... of personal identity whereas personal identity consists in consciousness” and thus Helm would suggest that memory is not that important at all. Helm suggests that it would be possible for memory swaps to occur, but that the identity of the original owners of each memory would not swap with the memories. This is hard to imagine, as it would seem that if we lost our entire memory, we would be a completely different person. It seems to me that Helm is unable to explain what consciousness really is if memory plays no part in it whatsoever. When we are unconscious, asleep or in a coma, we have no awareness of ourselves—have we lost our consciousness and our identity too? In order to move on both from Helm's slightly confusing definition of consciousness and Locke's original problematic suggestion, I will discuss a common refinement of the intuitive Lockean identity₁; the psychological-continuity viewpoint.

The Psychological-Continuity Viewpoint

The psychological-continuity viewpoint¹² suggests that identity is a psychological relation between objects. Proponents of identity₂ would solve the counter-example to identity₁ by suggesting that there is a psychological relation between the girl, lawyer and elderly woman, meaning that this is just one woman, which intuitively seems to be the right answer. This solves the problem of forgetting certain memories, since it is the psychological relation between myself at two points which ensures my single identity, not those memories. Certainly, in comparison to identity₁, the importance of memories is vastly diminished, however memories certainly play an important role compared with Helm's version.

history between A and B.” (Helm, P. (1979), *Locke's Theory of Personal Identity*). Here, the young woman (x) and the elderly lady (z) are the same kind of thing (a female person) and there must be a continuous spatio-temporal history between them; thus their identities ought to be the same.

¹⁰ See Butler's “Of Personal Identity” in “*The Analogy of Religion*” in Bibliography.

¹¹ Here, I refer to Helm, P. *Locke's Theory of Personal Identity* (1979). See References.

¹² In line with my use of “identity₁” to refer to the memory theory of identity, I will use “identity₂” to refer to the psychological-continuity viewpoint in the essay.

The important role of memory depends on which different sub-viewpoint one takes of identity₂. Generally, because memory cannot wholly provide this continuity, proponents of identity₂ believe that memory is an important part in this continuity, either because it is in itself one method of causing a continuity (remembering something creates a psychological link between past self's experience and current self's memory) or because it provides indirect memories between different states.

Identity₂ has a clear weakness—its dependence on mental states rather than physical states. If it were possible to copy mental states, what would happen if person A's mental state was swapped with the mental state from person B, but their physical bodies and brain remained the same? According to identity₂, the answer is clear—there would be two distinct identities, but they would have switched physical bodies, which seems odd. However, it seeming odd can easily be refuted; but the question of fission cannot.

Fission refers to the separation of one mind to create two. Let's say that person X's mental state is split¹³ and X keeps one half of the mental state and Y receives the other half, losing the entirety of the rest of its mental state. Would there be two X's? Both new minds are psychologically continuous with X's original one, but, because they separate, X and Y would have different experiences, memories and knowledge after the fission experiment and so could not be the same.¹⁴ Furthermore, what would happen if both X and Y's mental states were split and then they swapped half a mental state? Surely the two beings left would be both X and Y, since they would be psychologically continuous with both?¹⁵ Identity₂ seems unable to satisfy these problematic experiments.

Other Theories of Identity

There are two methods to solve these problems: multiple-occupancy¹⁶ and the non-branching view¹⁷. Identity₃ describes that there were always two identities, but that up until then they had coincided. Imagine a road with a fork: some people would say that it was actually two identities of roads which coincided up until the fork, after which they moved apart. Thus, they say, there were always two identities within X's

¹³ It should be noted that there are generally three areas of the brain related to the function of the memory. It could be possible to use physical separation of the brain to create two halves in the brain. In this essay I will use the word "mind" or "mental state", however, because the important thing is the *psychological* continuity, rather than the physical continuity which the word "brain" could suggest. I will therefore talk about the different "minds", but this could be through the physical separation of the brain.

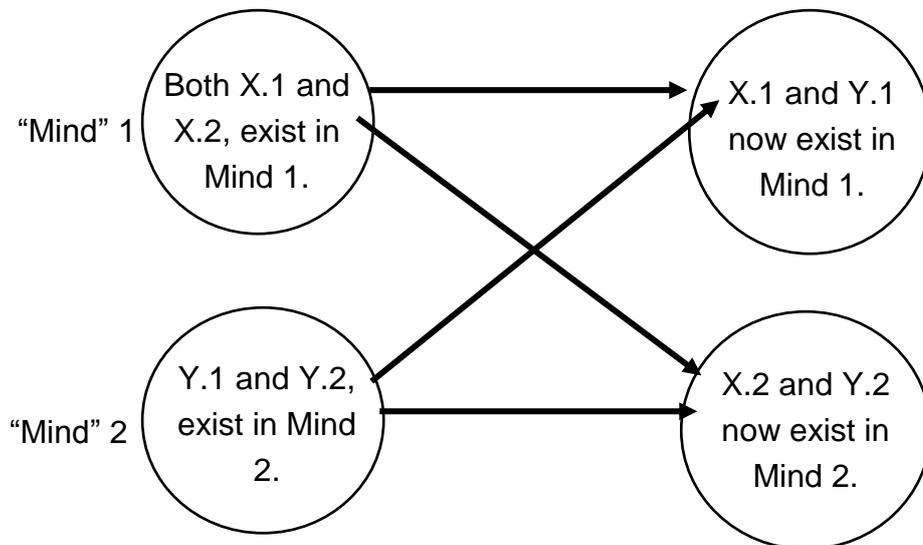
¹⁴ The experiment talked about until now will be labelled "Fission₁".

¹⁵ The experiment talked about until now will be labelled "Fission₂".

¹⁶ I will use "identity₃" to refer to the concept of multiple-occupancy, also known as moderate monism or monism.

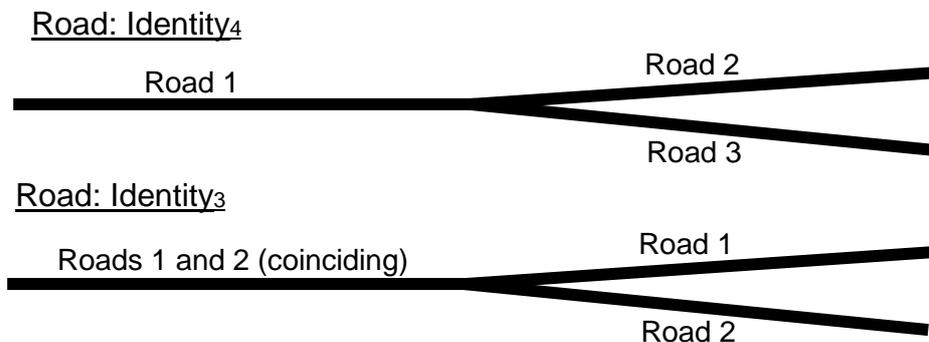
¹⁷ I will use "identity₄" to refer to the non-branching viewpoint.

mental state, and they were eventually separated in fission₁. Fission₂ would be solved in a similar fashion, which can best be explained graphically:



The problem with identity₃ is that we think there has been a single mind with a single identity up until the point when it is split, contrary to what identity₃ suggests—but identity₄ can solve this problem.

Identity₄ would explain that fission would form two new and separate identities. For example, fission₁ would be explained by stating that X, the original person, is separate from the two new identities: both the left and right side of the brain have identity X when together, but when split have their own new, different identities. This can perhaps be explained in terms of the road I mentioned earlier:



Identity₄, whilst solving the problem of a single original identity, is unable to avoid the problem we think that we would still retain our “self” or identity in both new minds if we imagined our brain being split, a problem avoided by identity₃. The issue is clear: there is an incompatibility between our three instinctive beliefs that: (i) there original mind is a single identity; (ii) the two new minds both have the same identity as the original mind and (iii) the two new minds, having gained new memories after fission₁, must be different. In order to avoid (iii), identity₃ or identity₄ is taken rather than the identity₂, however identity₃ can’t provide (i) and identity₄ can’t provide (ii).

So where does memory fit into this, even if no theory seems quite perfect? I have already explained identity₂'s relation to memory—memory is important as a causal connector either directly or indirectly. Identity₃ would suggest that memory is very important for the two coinciding identities as it is what keeps them as identities through fission₁. Identity₄, however, takes the importance away from memory. Even if the two new minds created by fission₁ retain the memories of the original mind, they are different identities, suggesting that continuity of memory is not important (since both minds have a psychological continuity with the first), but that either memory is unimportant or that it is memory as a whole which is important, not a psychological continuity. Due to the problems of the latter view, for example the question of whether losing a single memory or forgetting one thing would change the identity of a person, I believe that identity₄ is forced to suggest the unimportance of memory.

Identity₃ and identity₄, therefore, have conflicting views of the importance of our memories for our identity—so to answer the question, it seems that the nature of identity must be settled. Yet, as I alluded to earlier, identity₂ suffers from a conflict of three ideas and it seems that no matter how identity₃ and identity₄ are pitted against one another, they come out both as weak and strong as one another. Take one problem: identity₃ and identity₄ were designed to solve the challenge of fission; but both seem to create an explanation of identity which is counter-intuitive when thought once again in terms of a single mind. Identity₃ suggests that if a mind never splits, it has one identity, but that a single mind which splits has always been two separate identities, despite the fact that we find no difference before the fission of the latter! On the other hand, identity₄ suggests that someone who loses half their mind (and the lost half is destroyed) continues with their same, single identity; but that someone whose mind splits in two has had three identities—one identity before the fission and one for the left and right mind after the fission—but what difference is there between these two people: one who undergoes fission, one who loses half their mind?

Conclusion

Since the argument about identity is far from over, I think it's hard to suggest any logically certain position on the importance of memory for our identity, but a best possible explanation of identity can be used to provide an argument for the importance of memory for our identity. When we see scientific studies of people with memory loss, it seems that these are different people—indeed, some people believe that we are reincarnations of previous beings. Yet, we may as well have a different identity to our supposed predecessors because when a person talks about their self, their “me-ness”, they do not associate this with some previous person, or someone with a different memory. So from experience it certainly seems like identity is based on memory. When considering different theories of identity, both the theories of identity and the problems with said theories seem to focus on memory. Identity₂ and its simpler

Lockean ancestor are both focused on memory and the problem of fission which is posed to this is a problem of memory. Indeed, the problem with identity₃ and identity₄ is that they are both unable to satisfy our intuitive views about memory—we think that after fission, two entities with different experiences and memories must have different identities, yet they both seem to have the same identity as the pre-fission mind. This underlying importance of memory, both in the theories of identity and critiques of theories, suggests that our memories are very important for our identity, even if we are unable to pin down the exact nature of our identity.

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