Personal Identity

Fission, Fusion and Survival

from Harriet Baber, used w/permission. I have added some slides. The addenda will have non-white backgrounds. I have taken many out. The link will show you the original.
What Matters for Survival?
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  – I don’t think so!
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- The continued existence of a spiritual substance?
What Matters for Survival?

• “Surviving” in the memory of others? Having your good deeds live after you?
  
  – I don’t think so!

• The continued existence of your mummified corpse?

• The continued existence of a spiritual substance?

• Is the existence of anything identical to me in the future a necessary condition on “what matters” for survival?
Does personal identity matter?

Derek Parfit, in a series of articles in the 1970s and his 1984 *Reasons and Persons* argues that identity is not “what matters”
His Goals

1. To challenge the idea that questions of personal identity (PI) must always have answers. [Personal identity is not privileged, and can be just as messy and unresolvable as difficult cases of machine-, sports team-, restaurant-, band-, or machine-identity.]

2. There is a belief that, unless we can answer certain questions about PI, that we cannot answer certain important questions about survival, memory, and responsibility. Parfit will argue that we can and should abandon this belief, and, consequently, show that some questions about identity have no importance.
Identity Problems for Spatio-Temporal

• **Identity is transitive:** if $a = b$ and $b = c$ then $a = c$
  
  – But there are cases in which identity seems to be one-many rather than one-to-one, so that $a = b$ and $b = c$ but $a \neq c$

• **Identity does not admit of degree**
  
  – But spatio-temporal objects can undergo gradual change and “become” other things

• **Intuitively identity is intrinsically grounded:** nothing other than the intrinsic properties of $a$ and $b$ should make any difference to whether $a = b$ is true
  
  – But there are puzzle cases where, it seems, we can only avoid violations of transitivity of identity by denying intrinsic grounding.
Personal Identity

• Personal identity is identity

• So all these problems arise in a particularly virulent form when we consider the identities of persons

• Parfit will consider
  – “fission” and “fusion” cases in which transitivity is violated
  – cases in which personal survival seems to me a matter of degree

• We’ll consider the general problem posed by the identities of spatio-temporal objects generally and then the way in which these problems arise in the special case of personal identity
The Ship of Theseus

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned [from Crete] had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians …for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.
Things can survive the gradual replacement of parts

- Suppose the planks that composed the Ship of Theseus were gradually replaced until none of the original planks is part of the Continuously Repaired Ship at the end of the process

  - If you claim that it wouldn’t be the Ship of Theseus then you have to say at what point the Ship ceases to exist

- We can’t say that with the replacement of each plank the resulting ship becomes “less identical” to the original Ship of Theseus until it ceases to be identical altogether since identity doesn’t admit of degree

- It would be deeply counterintuitive to say that there is a crucial plank (first, last or something in between) so…

- The Continuously Repaired Ship = The Ship of Theseus
Things can survive disassembly and reassembly

• Suppose instead of being gradually repaired the Ship of Theseus had been disassembled by a Plank Hoarder and then reassembled somewhere else

  – We want to hold that artifacts like ships, bicycles, (mechanical) watches, etc. can be taken to bits and reassembled—it happens all the time!

  – Some things in fact are *made* to be disassembled and reassembled for storage or for shipping so...

• The Plank Hoarder’s Ship = The Ship of Theseus
We can’t say that both the Continuously Repaired ship and the Plank-Hoarder’s Ship are the Ship of Theseus because The Continuously Repaired Ship $\neq$ The Plank-Hoarder’s Ship
The Ship Repaired AND Reassembled

We can’t say that both the Continuously Repaired ship and the Plank-Hoarder’s Ship are the Ship of Theseus because
The Continuously Repaired Ship ≠ The Plank-Hoarder’s Ship

Transitivity of Identity violation!
The Ship of Theseus (we agreed) could survive either the gradual replacement of all its parts or (we agreed also), it could survive disassembly and reassembly.
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So why can’t it survive both?
The Plank-Hoarder’s Ship would have been the Ship of Theseus if it weren’t for the Continuously Repaired Ship, which is the “better candidate” for being the Ship of Theseus.
The Ship Repaired AND Reassembled

The Continuously Repaired Ship $\neq$ The Plank-Hoarder’s Ship

Intrinsic Grounding violation!

The Plank-Hoarder’s Ship would have been the Ship of Theseus if it weren’t for the Continuously Repaired Ship, which is the “better candidate” for being the Ship of Theseus.
On this account identity is extrinsically grounded—the Continuously Repaired Ship fails to be identical to the Ship of Theseus because of an extrinsic property, viz. its coexisting with the Continuously Repaired Ship. But maybe this is OK…
It seems plausible to adopt a best candidate theory when it comes to the identities of languages through time: Italian is no further from Latin then English is from Anglo-Saxon but in the absence of any better candidate we think English is the same language as Anglo-Saxon, a.k.a. “Old English.”
Symmetrical Fission

Mother amoeba

Daughter amoeba

Binary Fission in Amoeba
Symmetrical Fission

Similarly, when an amoeba divides symmetrically we say the mother amoeba ceases to exist.
Symmetrical Fission

Similarly, when an amoeba divides symmetrically we say the mother amoeba ceases to exist.

If however the amoeba just “lost” half of its stuff and then regenerated so that only one amoeba remained at the end of the process we might want to say that the mother amoeba survived.
A Person Undergoes Fission

We split Jones brain and transplant the two hemispheres (which duplicate information) into the otherwise brainless bodies of Smith and Brown.

After the operation, both Smith-Jones and Brown-Jones sincerely claim to be Jones.

And both are equally good candidates!
HEMISPHERECTOMIES

- Parfit’s examples are not as crazy as you might think, read about hemispherectomy here:

- [http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=strange-but-true-when-half-brain-better-than-whole](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=strange-but-true-when-half-brain-better-than-whole)
Best Candidate Theory: The Dividing Self

But Smith-Jones and Brown-Jones can’t both be Jones since that would violate Transitivity of Identity!

So according to Best Candidate Theory we get this!
SPLIT-BRAINS

- A [youtube video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=example_video_id) on a split-brain patient.
Counterintuitive Results

- Even if a best candidate theory is ok for languages it is very implausible as an account of personal identity in the fission case because it makes our existence and survival depend on external factors that seem entirely irrelevant since, on this account:

  - At the Actual World, Jones hopes that one and only one of his brain hemispheres will survive because if both do he’s as dead as he would be if neither did

  - At Another Possible World, Brown-Jones is grateful to Smith-Jones for existing because if Smith-Jones hadn’t existed he would never have existed.
Is identity “what matters”?

The relation of the original person to each of the resulting people contains all that interests us—all that matters—in any ordinary case of survival. This is why we need a sense in which one person can survive as two.

- In light of the possibility of such fission cases (and also cases of extreme longevity to be considered), Parfit argues that identity is not “what matters” for survival

- “What matters” for survival, according to Parfit, is psychological continuity—that an individual’s total mental state should be part of a succession on states related by
  - Similarity: change should be gradual
  - Lawful causal dependence (possibly featuring memory most prominently)
Parfit’s Argument

1. Identity is one-one and does not admit of degree.

2. What matters for survival is psychological continuity.

3. Psychological continuity need not be one-one and may admit of degree.

4. Therefore, identity is not what matters for survival.
Parfit’s Puzzle Cases

- Psychological continuity is what matters for survival but

- In cases of simple fission and fusion, psychological continuity is not one-one.

- In cases of complex fission and fusion, in addition, psychological continuity seems to be a matter of degree.

- Identity is necessarily one-one and does not admit of degree so identity cannot be what matters for survival!
Simple Fission and Fusion

Fission: one thing “becomes” two

Fusion: two things “become” one
Identity is a one-one relation so that “becoming” can’t be identity!
Complex fission-fusion is even worse!

- Parfit imagines a species of individuals who undergo fission every spring and fusion every fall.
- Who am I? Which future(s) should I care about?
Is continuity a matter of degree?

- The complex fission-fusion case suggests that psychological continuity may be a matter of degree.

- Lewis suggests that in the Methusalah case psychological continuity may be a matter of degree also.
Consider Methuselah. At the age of 100 he still remembers his childhood. But new memories crowded out the old. At the age of 150 he has hardly any memories that go back before his twentieth year. At the age of 200 he has hardly any memories that go back before his seventieth year…When he dies at the age of 969 he has hardly any memories that go beyond his 839th year.
The R-Relation

- Lewis calls the *temporal unity relation for person* the R-Relation.

- The R-Relation is the relation of mental continuity and connectedness among person-stages that matters for survival.

- And, Lewis argues, our "criterion" for personal identity through time such that:

  \[
  \text{A at } t \text{ is the same person as } B \text{ at } t' \iff \text{A's stage at } t \text{ is R-related to B's stage at } t'
  \]