

# How can there be personal continuity through one or more lifetimes?

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by Richard Hayes in the autumn of 2009

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## 1. Introductory remarks

Today's question is: How can there be personal identity through one or more lifetimes? In framing the question just this way, I am opening up a can of worms. Much of this lecture will be examining some of those worms one by one. Philosophy does, after all, have much in common with oligochaetology, that branch of biology that concerns itself with the study of worms.

In the introduction to a collection of papers on the problem of personal identity, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty outlines the major issues that are explored by different philosophers who deal with the issue of person identity.<sup>1</sup> Among those issues are:

- What is it that makes human beings distinct from other beings who have features in common with human beings? For example, how do human beings differ from chimpanzees, robots, human corpses, business corporations, and hobbits?
- Given that human beings have so many features in common, what are the criteria that allow us to distinguish one individual from another?
- What are the criteria for establishing that an individual is the same individual in different contexts, or under different descriptions or at different times?
- What are the features that a person must have to continue being exactly the person she is *psychologically*? What does it mean to have an essential personality? What characteristics, if lost, would require her to think that she was no longer the same person she used to be? Usual candidates for essential characteristics are such things as core values, preferences, tastes, plans, hopes and fears. A biological individual might, for example, retain the same DNA and fingerprints, and have access to the

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1. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1976).

memories of her former life and yet feel that after, say, a deeply traumatic experience or a religious conversion, she would never again be the same person.

This notion of having an essential self raises the interesting question of whether human beings can change their essential features. Normally, philosophers think of essences as properties that cannot be lost without existence as a particular thing or kind of thing itself being lost. And yet many have argued that the essence of being human is that we can, as individuals, choose to change our essential properties. Charles Taylor, drawing on observations made by Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre and Harry Frankfurt says that a person can be defined as “one who can raise the question: Do I really want to be what I am now?”<sup>2</sup>

In his book *Selfless Persons*,<sup>3</sup> Steven Collins made extensive use of the thinking of the philosopher Derek Parfit as a means of discussing problems in the Buddhist doctrine of non-self (*anātman*). Since Collins’s work appeared it has come to be a standard practice to discuss classical Buddhist claims about personal identity in the framework of Parfit’s work. We shall take a look at the issues that Parfit raised later. But before looking at Parfit, it may be helpful to review some of the ideas of John Locke, since his way of looking at personal identity has framed the way the problem is thought about in European philosophy.

## 2. John Locke

When John Locke (1632–1704) wrote about personal identity, his reasoning was approximately as follows:<sup>4</sup>

- What gives an animal its biological identity as a human being or a cat or a parrot is the shape of its physical body, not its mentality. So even if a cat could reason like a man, we would say it is a clever cat, not a man in a cat's body. Similarly, even if a man were no more capable of speaking than a cat, we would say that he was a dull-witted man, not that he was a cat in a man's body.
- When we speak of a *personal identity*, we do not mean a person's physical identity. Rather, when we speak of a *person*, we mean “a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself.”
- What gives someone a sense of *self* is just his consciousness; it is this which distinguishes someone from other people, and it is this which stays somehow the same. So it is consciousness that gives a person her identity.
- Something more is required for a thinking substance to be regarded the *same* being from one moment to the next. Obviously that something further cannot be an identity

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2. Charles Taylor, “Responsibility for Self,” ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1976).

3. Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

4. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser, (New York: Dover, 1959).

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of the contents of consciousness, for what someone is aware of at one moment is not exactly the same as he was aware of the moment before. We might be tempted to think that memory is the key to identity, but at any given moment our memory does not have access to every experience from the past. Memory is constantly interrupted—we remember now one thing, now another—so at any given moment we have only an incomplete access to our past selves. So this gives rise to doubt as to whether we are the same self as we were in the past.

- The issue of whether a thinking substance is the same from one moment to the next has no bearing on the question of *personal identity*. Different thinking substances are all united in a single *person*.
- The criterion for a *personal self* is the ability to “repeat the *idea* of any past action with the same consciousness it had of it at first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present action.”
- A man may lose part of his physical body without undergoing any change in his sense of personal identity. This shows that personal identity is not based on the composition of one's body.
- If someone were committed to materialism, then he would have to hold the view that one's personal identity is situated entirely in the physical body, for this would remain the same even if the thoughts contained in it underwent change.
- If someone is committed to a position of mind-body dualism, then he might see the possibility that one and the same soul could occupy more than one body. And if a dualist accepted this, he might then say that a person can retain her identity despite undergoing a change of bodies. Locke says he sees no reason why this could not be the case.
- It is even possible that a mind-body dualist could hold that a conscious soul could first occupy one body and then occupy a second body but lose all memory of its actions in the first body. So here the soul could remain the same despite no continuity of access through memory to its previous states. Plato and other philosophers who believed in reincarnation held a view along these lines.
- If anyone thinks about the matter, he will see that “he has in himself an immaterial spirit, which is that which thinks in him and in the constant change of his body keeps him the same as is that which he calls himself...” Now, if there is no access to the memories of a previously existing person, then there is no basis for saying that one has the same personal identity as that previous person, even if it did turn out that one had the same soul. In other words, the soul could transmigrate, but in doing so it would change personal identities.
- If, on the other hand, the soul did retain the memories of its actions in a previous body, then we could say that the same person had a succession of bodies. What this possibility does is to preserve the possibility of a physical resurrection in which the

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resurrected body did not contain any of the same atoms as the body originally occupied by the soul.

- “*Self* is that conscious thinking thing... which is sensible or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for *itself*, as far as that consciousness extends.”
- *Personal identity* is an important matter, because it is the foundation of all concepts of rights, justice, rewards and punishments. It is not the physical body that determines one's personal identity, and so the physical body is not the foundation of rights, justice etc.
- Similarly, it is not the soul that determines one's personal identity. If, for example the soul were to transmigrate from one body to another, but there were no memory when in the second body of what it did in the previous body, then there would be no justice in punishing the second body for the deeds of the first body.
- If a man were to completely lose all memory of actions performed in an earlier stage of life, then there would be no justice in punishing the later man for what he did earlier in his life. In this case we would say the man remains the same, but he has undergone a change of persons. So if a person were to go completely mad, it would not be just to punish him for actions that he did while sane, or vice versa.

Locke summarizes his position in these words:

*Person*, as I take it, is a name for this *self*. Wherever a man finds what he calls *himself*, there, I think, another may say is the *same person*. It is a forensic term, appropriating actions and their merit, and so belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of a law, and unhappiness and misery.

Joseph Butler (1692–1752) said of Locke that his identification of the person as something that depends on the memory is unsatisfactory, because it places all emphasis on the past and fails to take into consideration our all our aspirations for the future. Butler was a Christian bishop who was concerned with the afterlife, but he said that even if one thinks only in terms of this life, it is very common for people to plan for their old age and to have aspirations as children for their adult lives. Locke's account of personhood does not take this sufficiently into account. As he describes personhood, the person for whose retirement a young person is saving money would be more remote and abstract than one's own parents or siblings. In other words, Locke gives you no rational basis for making decisions today that could have an impact on your health and well-being even tomorrow, let alone a few decades from now.

Criticisms of Locke notwithstanding, his criterion of personhood or selfhood has proved to be the most durable candidate. Although not many philosophers accept it exactly as Locke stated it, most philosophers use his view as a basis and then refine it in various ways, usually by making an appeal to some version of the concept of causal continuity. The decisions you make now are the beginning of a causal chain, the effects of which will be experienced by an older person in a way that they will not be experienced by, say, your cousin or your

roommate. That future person who will experience the effects of what you decide to do now will be an older version of yourself; that is, that person will (still) have your personal identity.

### 3. Derek Parfit (1942- )

Parfit teaches at All Souls College, Oxford University. He has made important contributions to the fields of ethics and metaphysics. In his book *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit investigates a range of problems dealing with ethics, time and endurance through time and personal identity.<sup>5</sup> The first part of the book deals with moral stances that are either directly or indirectly self-defeating. Part Two deals with issues in rationality and time. Part Three explores personal identity, and Part Four investigates the consideration of our actions on future generations. A conclusion toward which he argues is that, generally speaking, our ethical reasoning would be more sound if we could learn to take ourselves less personally. That book was published in 1984, two years after Collins's book. Both Collins (1982) and Parfit (1984) build upon ideas outlined in Parfit's 1971 article called "Personal Identity."<sup>6</sup>

#### 3.1. Statement of the problem

In the opening section of his article, Parfit states what his agenda is: "My targets are two beliefs: one about the nature of personal identity, the other about its importance."<sup>7</sup>

First, about personal identity there is the belief that the question about identity must have an answer. That is, the belief is that there should not be cases in which it is impossible to decide whether two conscious states belong to the same person.

This belief might be expressed as follows: "Whatever happens between now and any future time, either I shall still exist, or I shall not. Any future experience will either be *my* experience, or it will not."<sup>8</sup>

The implication of this belief, says Parfit, is that

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5. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

6. Derek Parfit, "Personal Identity," *Philosophical Review* 80, no. 1 (1971):. In this lecture I shall refer to the pagination of a reprint of the article in Derek Parfit, "Personal Identity," in *Metaphysics: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Michael J Loux, (London: New York: Routledge, 2001).

7. *Ibid.*, p. 374.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 374.

It makes people assume that the principle of self-interest is more rationally compelling than any moral principle.<sup>9</sup> And it makes them more depressed by the thought of ageing and of death.<sup>10</sup>

Second, about the importance of this concern with identity there is the belief that “unless the question about identity has an answer, we cannot answer certain important questions (questions about such matters as survival, memory, and responsibility.)” About that Parfit says:

Against this second belief my claim will be this. Certain important questions do presuppose a question about personal identity. But they can be freed of this presupposition. And when they are, the question about identity has no importance.<sup>11</sup>

Parfit does not claim that he can definitively prove that these two beliefs are false; he will be content to show that they pose some real problems and that it would therefore not be irrational to abandon these beliefs.

### 3.2. Discussion of the first belief

The belief to be discussed is: “Whatever happens between now and any future time, either I shall still exist, or I shall not. Any future experience will either be *my* experience, or it will not.” To show that there is a problem with this belief, Parfit refers to a thought experiment in which a scenario is given in which it becomes very difficult to decide whether or not some future experience belongs to a formerly existing person. The thought experiment, originally devised by David Wiggins, goes like this:

My brain is divided, and each half is housed in a new body. Both resulting people have my character and apparent memories of my life.

What happens to me? There seem to be only three possibilities: (1) I do not survive; (2) I survive as one of the two people; (3) I survive as both.

Alternatives 1 and 2 are immediately dismissed as highly improbable. If my thoughts and memories and personality and so on continue, then why should it be said that I do not survive? And if they continue equally in two different bodies, how could I possibly prefer one alternative to the other? This leaves the third alternative as the most likely.

There is bound to be initial resistance to the third alternative, because we are accustomed to thinking of a person as having only one consciousness, not two of them simultaneously. And

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9. Some moral philosophers, such as the eighteenth-century Christian minister Joseph Butler (1692–1752), have argued that the most rational form of ethics is to pursue what one recognizes, in a moment of “cool self-interest” to be to one's advantage. The key here for these philosophers is that when one takes a dispassionate look at what one's real interests are, one will know that it is in one's interests to look out for the needs of others. But one does not take care of others for *their* sake, but for one's own sake.

10. Ibid., p. 374.

11. Ibid., p. 375.

yet there have been cases where the links between the two hemispheres of the brain are severed, and people who have had the operation report that what they experience is two simultaneous trains of thought and experience. Neuropsychological experiments suggest that each hemisphere supports a flow of consciousness, and that both of these are experienced at the same time. If this situation is irreversible, then we begin to feel tempted to say that there are now two persons existing simultaneously. We would then say that the person who was once united has continued to survive as two persons. So there is no reason to rule this possibility out.

There is one further alternative, which Parfit ends up preferring:

The alternative, for which I shall argue, is to give up the language of identity. We can suggest that I survive as two different people without implying that I am these two people.<sup>12</sup>

The main reason that Parfit gives for preferring this new alternative is that the perplexity posed by Wiggins' thought experiment now disappears. Instead of having a question that has three possible answers, each of which seems contrary to reason, we can dismiss the question as one that need not be answered, because it rests on a false presupposition.

Parfit observes that there are many instances in which we do not feel we *need* to answer the question of whether **A** and **B** are identical. We do not feel a need to decide whether the England before 1066 was the same England as the England after 1066; we do not feel a need to say whether a machine is the same machine when it undergoes changes of parts.

### 3.3. Discussion of the second belief

The belief to be discussed is: “unless the question about identity has an answer, we cannot answer certain important questions (questions about such matters as survival, memory, and responsibility.” Parfit's strategy will be to show that we *can* meaningfully talk about survival, memory and responsibility without reference to the concept of identity.

Parfit begins with a discussion of kinds of relation. Identity is always a one-one relation. That is, it is a binary relation in which exactly one term satisfies the relation when another term is specified. For example,  $x=y+1$  is one-one, because for every value of  $x$  there will be exactly one value of  $y$  that makes the statement true. But  $x>y$  is one-many, since for every value of  $x$  there are infinite values of  $y$  that are of lesser value than  $x$ .

Identity is a one-one relation. For any term there will be exactly one term that is identical to it. But survival, as Wiggins' thought experiment shows, can be one-many. One person with a brain whose hemispheres have not be severed survives as two persons when the hemispheres have been severed.

Another way of stating all this is that *personal identity* is all or nothing, while *personal survival* can be a matter of degrees. So when a person is, say, 80 years old, we can ask

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12. Ibid., p. 377.

whether the 15-year-old girl she once was has survived. And we don't feel cheated when the answer is "Well, to some extent she has survived. Many of the personality traits she had at age 15 are no longer present, but in other ways she is the same old girl she used to be." This kind of answer is not available to us when we insist on asking "Is she, at the age of 80, identical to the person she used to be at the age of 15?"

### 3.4. Parfit's conclusions

Parfit claims that his argument, if accepted will have two consequences:

1. When the notion of personal identity is no longer in the picture, then ethical problems are no longer reduced to a dilemma of deciding whether it is better to act out of self-interest or out of general interest. All ethical problems now become simply deciding what is of general interest.
2. The worry about what will happen after death seems to be intensified by the belief that there is only one self, and that either this will survive or it will not. But this worry, claims Parfit, is not entirely natural. Rather, it is one that arises from the presupposition that there is a single self in the first place. If this presupposition can be seen to be at least questionable, then the idea that some aspects of what one now is will survive while others will not is not likely to produce much anxiety.

## 4. Application to Buddhist views

Among the most potentially confusing doctrines in Buddhism is that of *anātman*. The term literally means "non-self." But what exactly does the Buddha mean by "self"? What exactly is being negated? Buddhist scholars and teachers who have talked about this doctrine in English have offered a variety of translations for "ātman", such as "ego," "soul," "person," "identity," and "self." So the negation "anātman" has been explained as "egolessness," "soullessness," "impersonality," "identitylessness" and "selflessness." One author has suggested that the Buddha's teaching of *anātman* is an invitation to stop being narcissistic, so presumably the translation of "anātman" would then be "narcissismlessness." Each of these translations is misleading in some way. To see why, it may be helpful to look at what is supposed to be one of the Buddha's first discussions with the five ascetics who eventually became his first disciples.

In that discussion the Buddha says simply that the body is neither the *ātman* nor one's property. If it were, he says, then one would have more control or mastery (*svāmitā*) over it. One would, for example, be able to prevent it from being ill, from getting old, from dying and so forth. The same observations are made, with suitable changes, about consciousness and its associated factors. If one were to paraphrase all the Buddha says into contemporary terminology, he would be saying that one's *ātman* is neither the body nor the mind. It is not one's personality or temperament or character. It is none of these things, because all of these things can and do change. That change is a key consideration is reflected in this passage from the *Samyutta-nikāya*:



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Better it would be to consider the body as the *ātman* rather than the mind. And why? Because this body may last for 10, 20, 30, 40, or 50 years, even for 100 years and more. But that which is called “mind,” “consciousness,” “thinking,” arises continuously, during day and night, as one thing, and as something different again it vanishes. (SN 12.61)<sup>13</sup>

In the many discussions of the *ātman* (*atta*) in the early canonical works, it is said that instead of speaking of an *ātman*, the Buddha speaks of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). In the passage just cited, for example, the Buddha then goes on to say this:

Now, here the learned and noble disciple considers thoroughly the Dependent Origination: If this is, then that becomes. Through the arising of this, that comes to arise; through the extinction of this, that becomes extinguished, namely: Through ignorance conditioned arise the karma-formations; through the karma-formations, consciousness (in next life); through consciousness, corporeality and mind;... through the extinction of ignorance, the karma-formations become extinguished; through the extinction of the karma-formations, consciousness... etc.

What this suggests is that rather than speaking of something that has a fixed nature, as one would expect an *ātman* to have, one should speak of a process. It will be recalled that one of the issues that Amélie Rorty said that Western philosophers have discussed is the question “What are the criteria for establishing that an individual is the same individual in different contexts, or under different descriptions or at different times?” Put in another way, this question might be rephrased “What remains stable in a person when other aspects of the person are changing?” The Buddhist answer to that question is: nothing. Nothing remains absolutely stable, for everything is involved in the process. All we can say is that some things change faster than others; the most stable of the many things we may think of as a self is the body, since it changes the least rapidly.

Let us now explore some of the hazards involved in translating “ātman” in various ways. One standard translation is “self.” This makes a good deal of sense as a translation, since “ātman” like “self” is a reflexive word and can be used as an equivalent of such English reflexive pronouns as “myself,” “himself” and so on. We must be cautious, however, to distinguish between this kind of self and the kind that John Locke spoke of when he wrote

*Self* is that conscious thinking thing... which is sensible or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for *itself*, as far as that consciousness extends.

Clearly, the Buddha would want to say that we *do* have that kind of self, although it might be denied that there this conscious thinking thing that cares about its own happiness and misery

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13. The translation is that of Nyanatiloka, except that I have replaced the word “ātman” in place of his translation “ego”. His translation can be found on line at <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel202.html#extracts>

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is a simple entity rather than a number of functions bundled together and thought of as a single thing.

Some have rendered “ātman” as “person,” which has the advantage of making sense when it is negated as “impersonal.” It does seem to be the point of the Buddhist teachings that discontent arises when we take our experiences too personally. Here, too, one should be aware of how Locke, and those influenced by him think of the person. Recall that Locke wrote:

*Person*, as I take it, is a name for this *self*. Wherever a man finds what he calls *himself*, there, I think, another may say is the *same person*. It is a forensic term, appropriating actions and their merit, and so belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of a law, and unhappiness and misery.

What the Buddhist tradition would wish to add is that there is a *process* of actions being followed by the natural consequences, but there is nothing doing the actions or experiencing the rewards. The Buddha is reported as responding to the question “But who, Venerable One, is it that feels?” as follows:

“This question is not proper,” said the Exalted One. “I do not teach that there is one who feels. If however the question is put thus: ‘Conditioned through what, does feeling arise?’ then the answer will be: ‘Through sense-impression is feeling conditioned... through feeling, craving; through craving, clinging...’”

And yet, there is much to be said for Locke’s observation that “person” is a forensic term. Its cash value is its use in legal contexts, where it is important to determine whether a human being qualifies as an owner of a piece of property, or the perpetrator of a crime, or someone who has entered into a contractual agreement. So long as the word “person” is regarded as merely an indispensable legal and social fiction, then the Buddhist tradition would not wish to deny its utility. In any case, it is clearly not *that* sense of a person that the Buddhist wishes to negate by using the term “anātman.”

Given the centrality of the question of what remains the same in a person when other aspects change, some have preferred to translate “ātman” as “identity,” since the Latin root of the English word means “sameness.” Here again, one would have to be aware of Locke’s use of personal identity when he says that personal identity is the foundation of all concepts of rights, justice, rewards and punishments. Here again, the point is that it is a legal fiction but one that society could not easily function without. It is not *this* kind of personal identity that the Buddhist seeks to negate by using the term “anātman.” Moreover, if the question of tonight’s talk were asked, “How can there be personal identity through one or more lifetimes?”, both Locke and the Buddha would probably say “Personal identity is not in most systems of law something that endures through many lifetimes. It stops existing at death, and even if there is some kind of continuity of something from a person’s life into the future, that continuity does not have the same legal rights and responsibilities as the person who was alive.”

## 5. So what survives the death of the physical body?

Let us now return to the question with which we began: How can there be personal identity through one or more lifetimes? Buddhist lore is, after all, filled with stories of personalities surviving the death of a body and being more or less transferred from one body to another, usually without any memory of the experiences of the previous body. Popular lore, in other words does speak of rebirth as something that involves the retention of a personal identity as Parfit describes identity. Recall that Parfit claimed, rightly I think, that identity is a one-one relation. So if the pop star Madonna is the continuation through rebirth of the personal identity of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, then there can be only one occurrence of that personal identity at a time. It cannot be the case that both Madonna and Derek Parfit are continuations of the personal identity of Cleopatra. If they both believe that they are a continuation of Cleopatra's personal identity, then at least one of them is entertaining a false belief.

Since Derek Parfit's name has once again come to the forefront, let me say that I would like to suggest that he has also given the most promising approach to the question that is the subject of today's talk. His approach is to drop the idea of personal identity altogether and replace it with the idea of personal survival. Recall that for Parfit survival is not a one-one relation but a one-many relation. It can be said without contradiction that a person survives in many ways and that these ways can occur at the same time. And this, I think, is something that gets very close to the heart of the purpose of teaching the doctrine of karma.

The Buddhist doctrine of karma is that every action has consequences. But no action has only one consequence. Think, for example, of my action of giving this lecture. That action (or set of actions) has a multitude of consequences. It puts some people to sleep, while it makes others very much awake in states of impatience or annoyance. Moreover, this or any other action sets in motion a chain of consequences that will continue for a very long time. Everyone who is in any way affected by those consequences can be seen as someone who participates in the survival of the person who performed the action. A student participates in the survival of all her teachers. Everyone of us participates in the survival of everyone who has ever existed in history, for all of us are in some way, even if only a small way, affected by the actions of all who have gone before us.

It is this realization that all our actions survive, potentially forever, through their consequences that is the central point in all the Buddhist discussions of karma. Personal identity has nothing to do with it except to get in the way of one's grasping that central point.

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