

What, if anything, do fission cases tell us about personal identity?

In this essay, I will argue that fission cases tell us that the psychological approach to personal identity is not correct. I will argue that IDM (Identity Doesn't Matter) by Parfit is the best response to fission cases by arguing that a four-dimensionalist response and a non-branching response are arbitrary and unintuitive. I will do this by assuming materialism, the view that everything, including human consciousness and identity, is ultimately the result of physical processes in the brain. From materialism, I will conclude that identity is merely a mental construct through which we order and categorise the world and our thoughts. Therefore, identity does not matter and theories which try to salvage personal identity, such as four-dimensionalism and a non-branching response, are pointless. Rather, one should accept that identity does not matter and that the only thing that matter to the individual is whether they survive.

Met opmerkingen [MOU1]: Interesting

Psychological theory of identity and fission cases

The psychological theory of identity defines personal identity in terms of psychological continuity over time. This means that a person remains the same as long as there is a continuous chain of psychological attributes such as memory, beliefs, and desires linking them over time. For instance, person A at time T1 is the same person as person B at time T2 if and only if person B remembers being person A, or if person A forms an intention that is later carried out by person B, and so on. More generally, psychological continuity does not necessarily require direct connections between every point in time but rather an overlapping chain of connections. For example, if there is an intermediary person C at time T1.5 who is psychologically linked to both person A and person B, then person A and person B may be considered the same person, provided that the continuity is sufficiently strong.

Met opmerkingen [MOU2]: Its not remembering being person A but remembering an experience had by person A.

Met opmerkingen [MOU3]: Be more precise in this paragraph, feels too much like a first draft.

Fission cases are counterexamples to this theory. They involve a scenario where a person's identity is split into two or more distinct individuals. This creates a situation where it is unclear which individual, if any, should be considered the continuation of the original. The Star Trek transporter case illustrates this. In this scenario, the transporter works by scanning the entire body of a person, transmitting this information to a new location and then at the same time vaporizing the body of the person and then assembling it in a different location. This becomes a fission case if the transporter malfunctions. Imagine that the transporter malfunction causes the person to be assembled twice. Suddenly, there are two completely identical copies of the original person (Amy Kind, 2015, chap. 3). One might argue that a more realistic example of fission could be found in hemispherectomy cases—medical procedures in which one half of the brain is removed, yet the patient often retains much of their cognitive function and sense of identity. If such a procedure were theoretically performed in a way that

Met opmerkingen [MOU4]: Be cautious with using it as a noun, because it is vague because it, in the psychological theory, is a relation.

allowed both hemispheres to be transplanted into separate bodies, we might face a real-world instance of identity splitting.

According to the psychological theory of identity, both copies, C1 and C2, have the same identity to the original person O. Both have psychological continuation with the original person. This would, however, lead to a very strange result. If C1 is equal to O and C2 is equal to O, then, because personal identity is a transitive relationship (e.g. if $a=c$ and $b=c$ then $a=b$), C1 must be equal to C2. However, clearly C1 and C2 are not the same person.

Identity is a mental construct

Before I consider responses to the fission objection, I want to show that if we assume materialism (which I will do for the sake of argument), it follows that personal identity is just a mental construct. According to materialism, all phenomena, including mental phenomena like thoughts, feelings, and consciousness, can be explained by physical processes and structures, such as those occurring in the brain and body. There is no separate non-physical substance, such as a soul or spirit, that exists apart from the body. The mind is simply a product of physical processes in the brain. In other words, mental states (thoughts, memories, experiences) are entirely reducible to the physical workings of neurons, brain chemistry, and other material components. Since materialism holds that the mind is a product of physical processes, the notion of personal identity itself can be seen as a mental construct. That is, personal identity is not a metaphysical or eternal essence that exists independently of the brain. Rather, it is the way we mentally organize and interpret our experiences of ourselves over time.

Some philosophers have argued that it is possible to construct a physical theory of personal identity. They will argue, for instance, that personal identity consists in having the same body or brain. However, if identity is merely a mental construct, this claim becomes trivial. It does not make sense to create an objective definition of something that does not exist and is merely a tool for categorising our experiences. Furthermore, this perspective helps explain why fission cases pose such a challenge: our cognitive framework for personal identity has evolved to deal with gradual changes and continuity, not radical duplications or divisions. When faced with scenarios like teleportation or fission, our ordinary identity concepts break down, revealing that they were never suited for such cases in the first place.

Identity does not matter

This explains why, in the end, identity does not matter. Because identity is only a mental construct with which we order the world, it is pointless to come up with a definition of it.

Met opmerkingen [MOU5]: For completeness, consider the other options such as that O is equal to C1 and not C2 etc.

Met opmerkingen [MOU6]: This view is called mereological nihilism. You have to defend this more with an argument such as the Theseus ship argument or the causal indeterminism problem.

This also requires you to accept scientific realism. Maybe the no miracles argument can defend this: I believe in the scientific because it is explanatory successful.

However, you could object that other theories such as that viruses exist also has a lot of explanatory power.

The mirror image of mereological nihilism is universalism: any grouping of atoms composes another object. However, this is just a contrary to common sense (you wouldn't count just a small part of the table as an object).

Met opmerkingen [MOU7]: You could also make the argument that being a person is mind-dependent.

Met opmerkingen [MOU8]: Parfit is not a mereological nihilist, so this is kind a misuse of him. Probably should frame it like:
If I teleport and everything works I am happy.
I I teleport and there are two of us I am also happy, even though there is no identity anymore (maybe because of the non-branching idea).
Therefore, (although I do not know why) identity does not matter.
Mereological nihilism is this why, because there is no such thing as identity, which is why its not important.

That is why a four-dimensionalist and a non-branching response to the fission objection do not work, they try to salvage a theory which is fundamentally pointless. And, in doing so, they come up with seemingly arbitrary conditions for when two things are and are not identical. This then further leads to more problems which make these theories seem unintuitive, such as the problem of overpopulation with the four-dimensionalist response.

The best response is, therefore, that identity does not matter. Parfit argues against the notion that identity is a fixed, essential characteristic of a person. Instead, what matters according to Parfit is 'survival'. The original person O should, according to Parfit, only care about whether they survive or not. It is pointless to ask who will have their identity, as identity does not matter. The only thing that matters to person O is whether they survive. According to Parfit, survival means the continuation of psychological continuity. It is not necessary that there is a constant, indivisible 'self' or 'identity' over time. Instead, what matters is whether a person's memories, desires, experiences, and consciousness are preserved in some form. These are the key elements that allow an individual to survive in Parfit's sense, even if their physical body changes, splits, or even if multiple copies of them emerge, as in fission cases. In fact, in the fission case, person O's memories, desires, and experiences live on in two individuals rather than two, so person O has no reason to be afraid to step into the transporter (Derek Parfit, 1984).

In conclusion, fission cases reveal the complexities and limitations of the psychological theory of personal identity, highlighting the challenges of defining continuity of self when identity splits or is replicated. As we have seen, the psychological approach faces difficulties in handling such scenarios, where both resulting individuals seem to possess psychological continuity with the original person, raising the question which individual, if any, should be considered the continuation of the original. By assuming materialism, it becomes clear that personal identity is a mental construct and that it does not really matter. As Parfit then argues, the only thing that matters *to the individual* is then whether they survive or not.

Bibliography

Amy Kind (2015) *Persons and Personal Identity*. Polity.

Derek Parfit (1984) 'Why Our Identity is Not What Matters', in *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: OUP.