Agrippa Kellum
Professor Markovits
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What it means to be Agrippa

In this paper I will argue that criteria for a person's numeric identity exist only subjectively. With this understanding, I will argue that it is more useful to consider survival a matter of degree rather than binary value as is the case with a numeric identity-based definition of persistence.

One may object that if numeric identity is subjective, two persons may disagree about whether a Agrippa persists and neither be incorrect, and that this is contradictory. Modifying the statement to become subjective in the form of "I think Agrippa no longer persists" can make the statement true but does not change anything about the truthfulness of whether Agrippa exists. Two persons may disagree about whether Agrippa smells good, but this is only possible because the statement "Agrippa smells good" is understood to be followed by an implicit "to me"-- there is no disagreement over objective fact. They would continue to argue that the statement "Agrippa no longer persists" is not understood to be followed by an implicit "to me" because it is a statement regarding an empirical question.

In case it is more clear, I will make a point about baldness rather than numeric identity. We may say that not having hair causes people to be bald. We may say that a bald person may have hair and be bald, but they must not have a certain amount. In this case, baldness is a binary value extrapolated from a degree— the degree to which a head is covered by hair. Some criterion must be used to perform this extrapolation: there must be a degree *X* of hair coverage where a person with any less hair coverage is bald, and otherwise they are not bald. Such a criterion is part of what a person means when they say "bald". If two people's criteria differ, because their criterion's value of X differs, they mean different things when they say "bald", even if only slightly. If somebody asks about Agrippa's hair coverage, it may often be convenient or descriptive *enough* to say "he is bald." But our choosing to use a binary descriptor to describe Agrippa's hair coverage does not affect or imply anything about whether Agrippa's hair coverage is a matter of boolean or degree.

I will argue that the statements "that person is not Agrippa", "Agrippa no longer exists", and finally "Agrippa has died" are all implicitly followed by a "by my criteria" even if the speaker is unaware of it. Furthermore, such statements may not be fully descriptive of Agrippa's fate. To illustrate this point, I will shift my discussion to the statement "that chair is not Chair A".

Consider the physical universe as an assortment of atoms. We may point to a part of the universe and refer to it as a chair, specifically Chair A. I assume that there is no property of the

physical universe that defines which atoms may be part of a chair or specifically Chair A. Clearly, the concept of the chair is our own; a label we attach to an otherwise arbitrary grouping of atoms. It need not be untrue that chairs exist or that one may be Chair A, but it is a subjective matter. It is, however, an objective statement that most or all people may refer to a given grouping of atoms as “a chair” or specifically “Chair A” according to some set of criteria.

A note before proceeding further: I realize that, when understanding the physical universe as an assortment of atoms, it is problematic to resolve what is meant by saying “people” in the first place. The existence of the subject, according to my argument, seems to be a subjective truth in itself. These issues are a separate topic, and I will assume that they can be resolved, as this is my understanding. Unless otherwise specified, when I say “person”/“chair” I mean “part of the universe that you and I would both likely refer to as a person”/”chair.”

Consider a disagreement about what it means to be a given chair:

Nathan and Taylor sit together on a chair— or rather, a grouping of atoms that they both consider a chair. Nathan and Taylor agree to refer to this chair as Chair A. An hour later, Nathan and Taylor are asked if they are sitting on Chair A. They agree that the chair they sat on before was younger than the chair they sit on now, but that they nonetheless continue to sit on Chair A. The two men and the object they sit upon are doused with yellow paint. Again, they agree that they continue to sit on Chair A, which has simply become more yellow.

The object that Nathan and Taylor sit upon has one of its legs replaced with a new leg. They agree that they continue to sit on the Chair A, albeit altered. The rest of the legs are replaced, one at a time, in the same fashion. Once the last leg is replaced, however, disagreement occurs. Nathan claims that he still sits upon the Chair A. Taylor, however, claims that a threshold has been crossed: the chair he sits on now, which he calls Chair B, is too different from Chair A to be considered the same chair. Nathan states that, had more of Chair A been replaced, then he would no longer be sitting on Chair A— replacing a mere four legs, he argues, does not make a new chair.

At no point have Nathan and Taylor disagreed about some fact of the objective universe; their account of events on a material level is the same. Both agreed that what they sat on had aged, that they and their seating had been doused in yellow paint, that the four legs beneath them were replaced with four different legs. Their point of apparent disagreement was upon no empirical basis: rather, they simply operated under different ideas about *what it means* to be a specific chair. Perhaps this is because they held different opinions about what it *should* mean to be a specific chair, though this need not have an empirical basis either. Specifically, they held different ideas about what amount of a certain change is necessary for a chair at one point in time to be numerically non-identical to another chair at another point in time. Because they did not agree about this, “Chair A” became a mere homonym for two separately constructed concepts. When Taylor says that he is no longer sitting on Chair A, what he is really saying is “the concept of what is Chair A that I hold does not describe what I am now sitting on.”

One may argue that if all account of objects above the atomic order are subjective, then any statement is true and there is no way to resolve conflict. However, this is not so. I may say "there are no chairs in this room", which implicitly means "nothing in this space that I consider a room meets my criteria for what is a chair". But should some arrangement of atoms exist in the room that does fit my criteria for what is a chair, my statement is objectively false.

Because we, as a society, actively work to homogenize our criteria for labelling objects a certain way, it is rarely necessary to consider the implicit subjectivity to a statement. However, there will always be ambiguities when these concepts reference objects in the physical world. This can cause miscommunication; Nathan may tell a stranger "I was sitting on a chair which was painted yellow", while Taylor may tell a stranger "I was sitting on a chair which was painted yellow and then replaced by a new chair" and the stranger would walk away with two rather different accounts of what happened.

It is true that Nathan, Taylor, and the rest of society could convene and form some consensus over what it means for an object to continue being a specific chair— what sorts of changes and to what degree qualify its becoming a new chair. However, in the face of ambiguity, it seems more useful for Nathan and Taylor to simply say "I was sitting on a chair which was painted yellow, some parts of it were replaced, and so in the end I sat on a chair that was mostly the same chair but in some ways no longer the same chair." It is simply not always as useful to communicate in absolutes.

A strict definition may be useful for contracts: Say, for instance, Nathan and Taylor have been promised $100 if they continue to sit on Chair A for a certain time after its legs were replaced. However, the definition must still involve arbitrary thresholds (how much of the chair can be replaced before it becomes a different chair?) and likely be ambiguous in some way or another because not every possible chair-modifying occurrence can be predicted. Whatever happened to the thing Nathan and Taylor sat on does not turn on these definitions— if Nathan and Taylor wish to communicate *what actually happened* rather than whether the contract should be satisfied, they have no reason to discuss whether Chair A and Chair B are numerically identical in any sense.

And so it is the same with people as it is with chairs.

Consider a bodily criterion of Agrippa's numeric identity, and a definition of persistence that hinges upon said identity. Such a criterion would claim the following (with consideration for differences among accounts):

> Agrippa, who exists at time *X*, is numerically identical to Bgrippa, who exists at time *Y*, if and only if Agrippa and Bgrippa have the same body/Agrippa has continuous bodily states with Bgrippa.

In order to show that this criterion ultimately extrapolates a binary value from a degree, I will use an example inspired by similar examples from Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*, Chapter 11.

Imagine a hundred possible operations upon Agrippa, the set of which will be called *S*. All operations in *S* take Agrippa and output Bgrippa who may or may not be the same person. S_1 would cause Bgrippa's body to be 1% different from Agrippa's. For instance, Bgrippa may have the same body as Agrippa except that one of his fingernails is completely different. Surely, this is not enough of a difference such that we should consider Agrippa and Bgrippa different people. S_2 would cause Bgrippa's body to be 2% different from Agrippa's… finally, S_{100} would cause Bgrippa's body to be completely and totally different from Agrippa's. We may imagine S_{99} causes Bgrippa's body to be completely different from Agrippa's except that one fingernail is the same as Agrippa's. Just as S_1 does not justify calling Bgrippa and Agrippa different people, the lone fingernail in common does not seem like enough to make it useful to consider Bgrippa and Agrippa to be the same person.

Under a bodily criterion, some subset of *S* would output a Bgrippa that is numerically non-identical with Agrippa. Thus, just as with baldness, there is a threshold. The criterion considers the *degree* to which Agrippa and Bgrippa's bodies are different, and then outputs a binary value. Because there is unspecified threshold, two people may hold slightly different bodily criteria for numerical identity just as two people may hold slightly different criteria for baldness. Additionally, because the criteria are subjective constructions, none may be considered *objectively wrong* even if they may be considered objectively less communicative. This fact is not due to the presence of a threshold alone— however, the presence of a threshold does greatly increase the likelihood that two people may hold separate private criteria, which I take as demonstrative of my point.

Consider a psychological criterion of Agrippa's numeric identity, and a definition of persistence that hinges upon said identity. Such a criterion would claim the following:

> Agrippa, who exists at time *X*, is numerically identical to Bgrippa, who exists at time *Y*, if and only if Agrippa and Bgrippa are psychologically continuous with one another. Should any two states between Agrippa and Bgrippa not be psychologically adjacent, said continuity is broken.

Similarly as before, we can imagine a hundred possible operations upon Agrippa, the set of which we will call *R*. All of these operations output Bgrippa. R_X outputs a Bgrippa that is X% psychologically adjacent to Agrippa. For instance R_1 may output an Bgrippa whose psychological state is almost entirely the same as Agrippa's except that he does not believe that he enjoys Triscuits or recall enjoying Triscuits. R_{100} outputs a Bgrippa that does not remember anything that Agrippa remembered, like anything that Agrippa liked— this Bgrippa would not be psychologically similar or related to Agrippa in any way. We can also imagine an R_{99} that outputs a Bgrippa psychologically identical to the Bgrippa that R_{100} outputs except that this Bgrippa *does* believe that he enjoys Triscuits and recalls enjoying them in the past. Surely this

similarity of psychological state is not enough to make it useful to consider Agrippa and Bgrippa psychologically adjacent.

As with *S* to the bodily criterion, some subset of *R* would output a Bgrippa that is numerically non-identical to Agrippa according to the psychological criterion. There remains a threshold.

I argue that it is more descriptive for someone to refer to Agrippa's survival in terms of the degree to which post-event Agrippa fulfills their criterion for numeric identity with pre-event Agrippa, rather than for them to consider whether or not post-event Agrippa fulfills the criteria enough to cross some threshold (which I've referred to as persistence for the sake of clarity).

An account of Agrippa's persistence based on numeric identity is useful for social function, the drafting and enforcement of contracts, etc. For instance, if Agrippa commits a crime and Bgrippa is caught, the state must decide whether Bgrippa can be punished within the law. Agrippa may write a will— say, to be euthanized upon some condition. The state must decide whether this applies to Bgrippa. These decisions have binary outcomes, it cannot be decided that Bgrippa has a right *to a degree* or that he should be euthanized *to a degree*. However, this is merely incidental; a situational requirement imposed on our description of what it means to be Agrippa.

Suppose S_N would output a Bgrippa that is numerically identical to Agrippa according to the bodily criterion, where S_{N-1} does not. Imagine a congruent R_M for the psychological criterion. We can imagine a combined operation, $S_N \times R_M$, that will output a Bgrippa is numerically non-identical to Agrippa upon both criterion. Nonetheless, if Agrippa is interested in his own survival, and prompted to accept either $S_N \times R_M$ or $S_{100} \times R_{100}$, surely he would choose the former even if he considers his survival a matter of bodily or psychological continuity. The binary nature of this concept persistence built upon numeric identity does not seem to fully convey our ideas about survival.

Bibliography

Parfit, Derek (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford University Press. Web. Accessed Dec. 9, 2015.