

**Complex Persons: A Holistic Solution to
Personal Identity**

by

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Declaration

I certify that, except where acknowledgment is made, the work in this thesis is my own. I also certify that this thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or diploma to other universities or institutions.

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Abstract

The contemporary problem of personal identity can be traced to Locke's initial formulation of the problem, and to the difficulties inherent in his solution.

Following Locke, the favoured view in contemporary literature is that the primary locus of personal identity is in a person's psychological states or mind, to the exclusion of other factors, such as a person's body, or a person's environment. This thesis critically challenges the view that psychological continuity alone grounds personal identity.

In addressing the psychological continuity criterion, I argue that the most fully developed version of this criterion contains untenable presuppositions about the nature of psychological states. In particular, I argue that the thought experiments advanced in support of the psychological continuity criterion are not adequate to establish that psychological continuity alone grounds personal identity. I also challenge the internalist conception of mental states implicit in the psychological continuity criterion, and the commitment to an atomistic, owner-independent characterisation of mental states. I argue instead for a characterisation that is holistic and owner-dependent. I also defend the view that the body plays a positive role in personal identity, and that self-unity is a necessary condition for the possibility of experience.

Throughout the thesis there is a strong commitment to the view that conceptual analysis alone is insufficient to solve the crucial issues involved in personal identity. There is, therefore, a significant utilisation of current empirical research and studies to support this commitment. Throughout the thesis also, attention is paid to the ethical implications of the psychological continuity criterion's conception of personhood, and to the practical consequences which are likely to be involved in this conception, were it to be adopted.

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To Persons Everywhere

**'The Human Person is a threshold
where many infinities meet'**

John O'Donohue (1997), *Anam Cara*,
Sydney, Bantam Books, p 65.

Prologue

When I first began investigating personal identity, I knew nothing of the topic, nor did I know how to best deal with the huge array of material which confronted me. But as I worked my way through this material, I became aware of the psychological continuity criterial conception of personal identity. My first reaction was that this conception could not possibly be right, as it seemed to me to leave so much out about what persons fundamentally are. But as I became more aware of the implications of this predominantly psychological conception of persons and personal identity, I found myself becoming increasingly disturbed by the likely consequences and ramifications of this approach. Among these, three struck me the most. They concern the apparent disregard for the body, the alienation of moral responsibility, and the effective discarding of the self.

My concern with the neglect of the body relates to the lack of prominence given to the body by an excessively mental approach to personal identity, as this implies that bodies are of no consequence to who and what persons are. This gives the impression that what happens to the body is of little importance to persons' well-being, and unwittingly gives tacit approval to ways in which persons can be harmed through the body, such as by starvation, torture, wars, homelessness, prejudice, in fact, any form of deprivation or oppression which can be directed at persons, first and foremostly, through the body. While the psychological continuity criterion in no way directly countenances any of these things, its neglect of the body leaves a gap into which these things could inadvertently fall. If an account of personal identity is to be personally or socially useful, in my opinion, there should be no such gap.

My concern with the moral implications of the psychological continuity criterion relates to its extremely capricious and unworkable attitude towards moral responsibility. Because moral responsibility, on this view, is tied to a certain quantity of memory retention, rather than to a single-bodied person, who maintains a constant spatio-temporal path through the world, the importance of moral responsibility is effectively devalued. In my view, if persons are to be absolved from responsibility for their actions (and there are indeed legitimate circumstances where this is appropriate), there must be some good reason other than simply, 'Well, a certain amount of memory has been lost' - how could this ever be accurately known, and how could such a policy be effectively administered? I believe that this attitude makes a mockery of fairness and justice, and would ultimately lead to manipulation and widespread injustice, and furthermore, counts against the likelihood of long-term personal or societal reform.

Finally, my concern with the effective discarding of the self relates to two distinct questions regarding the self, which, on the materialist approach of the psychological continuity criterion, are conflated into a single question. These questions concern whether selves exist at the empirical, experiential level, and whether souls or 'unknown entities' exist at a transcendent level. In my view, the conflation of these two questions into a single question results in neither of these issues being addressed satisfactorily. According to the psychological continuity criterion, selves are no more than bundles of experiences, with no efficaciousness or potential. They are little more than grammatical constructs, tools necessary to refer to individuals, but with no existence outside this role. This approach to the self is problematic in at least two ways. First, it seems to me that there are no grounds in the personal identity debate to make pronouncements concerning the status of the self outside its empirical role, as personal identity concerns the empirical status of the self, and does not

concern the nature of souls or similar such entities. There is thus no evidence in this debate on which to make the claim that souls or transcendent entities do not exist. Such a claim is unsoundly based, and is, therefore, erroneous and misleading. Second, the reduction of the self to a mere bundle of experiences trivialises the self at the empirical level, and thus provides no explanation for the operation of agency, or for the emergence of creativity which self-unity makes possible. It is in virtue of these and similar concerns that my investigation into personal identity has been pursued, and that, as a result, the following thesis about personal identity been produced.