Philosophy Higher Level
Coursework
Metamorphosis: An Exploration into the Question of Personal Identity and Continuity of Self

Link with the syllabus: Core Theme – Personal Identity

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Stimulus

‘When Gregor Samsa awoke from troubled dreams one morning, he found that he had been transformed in his bed into an enormous bug.’

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1 Page 11, *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, Franz Kafka
Metamorphosis, by Franz Kafka, is a short story following Gregor Samsa as he wakes up one morning as a large insect. While exploring dark, fantastic themes and eventually ending in Samsa’s rejection from his family and death; this novel raises an interesting philosophical issue: that of personal identity. As Gregor is trapped in the body of an insect, is he still himself or does he assume the identity of the cockroach he resembles? Is our personal identity attributed to our physicality or psychology? This essay attempts to answer these questions by focusing on the necessary, and possibly sufficient conditions for continuity of self.

Locke suggests that continuity of memory (which he calls “consciousness”) results in continuity of personal identity. With respect to the stimulus, if Gregor has retained his memories of being a human, he is still Gregor. It does not matter that his biological make-up has undergone a qualitative change – if he can remember being himself before the change then he is still himself. Locke even disregards biological or physical continuity, explaining, “to punish the same Socrates waking for what sleeping Socrates thought, and waking Socrates was never conscious of, would be no more of right, than to punish one twin for what his brother twin did.”

This theory seems to hold true in other cases. For example, sometimes sufferers of dementia experience a personality change as well as, or perhaps due to, memory loss. Their continuity of consciousness is disrupted to such an extent that they may appear to experience a change in identity (at least, their relatives or friends might notice a change, or patients are described as ‘not themselves’). Similarly, in the thought experiment of assuming another body, the most common response is that I would have simply inhabited the new body, rather than become a new person. As humans we experience a unique notion of ‘self’ that is separate to our physicality; and Locke’s theory of continuity of memory is coherent with this notion.

However, I believe that continuity of memory is certainly not sufficient, and perhaps not necessary at all, for continuity of self. Take the example of getting drunk one night and embarrassing oneself in front of friends. If Locke’s theory is to be applied in this case, you are not the same person who performed the embarrassing act, and therefore have no grounds to be embarrassed; but I do not see how this follows. The feeling of embarrassment for something that we cannot remember suggests a certain empathy for, and ability to identify with whoever behaved so. This applies to embarrassing stories from childhood, which we may not remember but can still feel ashamed of. For me, this criticism of Locke’s argument is an important one. I cannot assume that whenever I cannot remember doing something I cease to be the person who acted. Memory is too unstable to underpin personal identity. I can remember my first day of secondary school, but I cannot recall what I had for breakfast two weeks ago – what does that mean for my identity? Am I the same person I was six years ago but a different person from two weeks ago?

In his work ‘Mind: A Brief Introduction’, Searle disagrees with Locke’s ideas about memory, instead suggesting that it is the continuity of a “single, unified conscious field” through which we experience the world, which allows for continuity of self. However, he also discusses four conditions which constitute our notion of personal identity. Interestingly, two of these notions (“Spatio-temporal continuity of body” and “Relative temporal continuity of structure”) are witnessed from an objective, third-person point of view; and one other is described by Searle as “mixed” – both first-personal and third-personal in terms of witnesses. This interesting feature of our ideas about identity leads me to ask: how personal is personal identity? Maybe it is a misnomer, which needs to be reconsidered in depth. Are we perhaps defined by others?

On my birth announcement, sent to family and friends, I am described as Susan and John’s daughter; a sister for Christopher. This approach is true of everyday life – we often describe ourselves or others in terms of relationships: X’s friend, Y’s colleague, Z’s cousin. Most of the introductions I have ever made are based on this structure, and I believe I am not the only one who does this.

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2  As quoted in ‘the Self’ booklet by XXXXXXXXX (Teacher)
3  Page 196, Mind: A Brief Introduction
This suggests that our identity can be somewhat defined by others. Indeed, if seen from this angle, many character-defining traits are only attributable to a person through others. For example, a funny person is not someone who can make themselves laugh (it would appear that anyone can do this), but rather someone who is able to make others laugh. Their funniness as a quality of their identity is only recognisable and identifiable through others. As the saying goes, “Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder”.

Of course, I do not believe that continuity of what I will call ‘inter-personal identity’ is a sufficient condition for continuity of self (the lonely man does not cease to exist if no-one thinks about him!) but I think it is interesting as a challenge to common thinking about what makes us us. It may be that, to an extent, we make us us! The continuity of self could rely, to a degree, on contact with others. This explains the horrors of solitary confinement as a form of punishment. Without interaction with others, is it possible that I could lose my sense of self? In many cases people who have been subject to solitary confinement undergo considerable changes in personality and may even become insane.

Furthermore, the example of feral children demonstrates how important human contact is for the development of young infants. As well as the obvious limited mental and linguistic development, feral children can show animal behaviour which suggests that they have little or no self-awareness as a human. As Karl Marx wrote, “Man is in the most literal sense of the word a zoon politikon, not only a social animal, but an animal which can develop into an individual only in society”. Could it be that inter-personal identity is an important, possibly necessary condition for the self?

Even if this inter-personal identity is a necessary condition for continuity of self, and I would argue that it is, I cannot ignore that our experience of our selves is also subjective, first-personal. Only I know how it feels to be me. For this experience of self, which I will call intra-personal identity, I return to Searle. Searle argues that it is the continuity of a “single, unified conscious field”, through which we have all our experiences, which is responsible for the continuity of self. This is not dependent on continuity of memory, but the ongoing sequence of experiences we encounter. I do not simply have an infinite number of disjointed, disorganised experiences throughout my existence; rather, I experience them all in relation to my unified consciousness. I believe that the field of consciousness can prevail through sleep. Although Searle does not extend his theory this far, he does point out that we are aware, upon waking, of “a sense of greater or lesser time having passed while one was asleep. This apparently is not true of people who have been knocked unconscious or have had a general anesthetic [sic].”

To me it makes sense that my continuity of self is partially explained by my continuous conscious field, which can prevail through sleep. I do not usually wake up and ask if I am still myself – I have a unique subjective insight into my self and can be confident that I have not undergone such dramatic qualitative changes overnight as to change my identity. This is something which Locke disregards. However, it is also important to note the implications of consciousness prevailing through sleep but not after a head injury – since this once again shows the importance of the physical body, and its health, with respect to continuation of self.

This single, unified conscious field could be seen from a Cartesian point of view, with Descartes’ ideas about the soul corresponding well with the theory. Descartes argues that there is an immaterial, irreducible soul in which the self resides. In adapting this notion, I would say that perhaps this soul (or the mental qualities that it shares) is related to the intra-personal identity, only directly experienced by the person to whom the soul ‘belongs’. Unfortunately for Descartes, neuroscience has demonstrated that the theory of an immaterial soul which functions causally in the physical world is highly unlikely and would not cohere with current laws of science. However, I think that the

As quoted Page 125, ‘Ideas of Human Nature: An Historical Introduction’, Roger Trigg
ibid.
Cartesian idea of one's self residing in mental states still holds a strong case, since these states refer to the way I think, my desires and my beliefs, which ‘shape’ my identity and make me recognisable to others and to myself.

I think that both inter- and intra-personal identities together constitute the self, and it is the continuity of both of these identities which forms the necessary, if not sufficient, conditions for the continuity of self. I hesitate to say that I have described the sufficient conditions, but I strongly believe that both identities can be seen as necessary conditions for the continuity of self. Together, they allow for conscious experiences, thought processes, physical recognisability for others, and ‘personality’ traits which can be witnessed externally to be taken into account.

This also seems to fit with how Kafka saw his character. Despite Gregor’s quantitative change to make him unrecognisable to others, his death at the end of the novel still draws an emotional response from the reader, and this suggests that his self has not completely altered (for I assume that such a response could not be elicited from a reader if they truly believed that Gregor was a bug). Kafka, therefore, seems to allude to the importance of multiple factors which together constitute a self.

However, there is one obvious criticism to my description of intra-personal identity: it suggests that anaesthesia or loss of consciousness lead to a change in personality. In some cases, perhaps a blow to the head could lead to a personality change, but for the most part it would be ludicrous to think that fainting is a sufficient condition for a change in identity or self. Despite this criticism, I hold firmly my belief that Searle offers the best answer to the problem of the self. Perhaps it is the continuity of a conscious field – as a way of thinking or problem-solving unique to each individual, not necessarily assuming uninterrupted consciousness – which corresponds to intra-personal identity.

In conclusion, continuity of self could be defined in terms of continuity of both inter- and intra-personal identities; which together explain many different aspects of an individual’s identity. The debate concerning physical continuity or psychological continuity is rendered irrelevant with this answer, because both forms of continuity are covered within the two personal identities. In order to remain myself, I must remain physically and characteristically recognisable as a human being and individual to others, whilst maintaining my psychological continuity as someone who processes information in a specific way. In other words, I and others must be able to recognise me as me in order for the necessary conditions for continuity of self to be met. This is demonstrated within ‘Metamorphosis’, since Gregor’s loss of inter-personal identity is so distressing that he loses the will to live; while his continuation of intra-personal identity renders his death tragic for the reader.
Bibliography


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