

# Survival and the First Person Perspective

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Let me be another to ask the question—what is it that matters in survival? When I imagine scenarios in which *I* have survived certain precarious situations, what do I imagine as being evidence of my survival? In most situations I imagine myself—just as I am now—a mother and a wife who, after being faced with possible death, would return home to the family I know and love. The continuation of my mental life is always a factor; psychological continuity seems to be what matters. But is this the only way to think about survival? Derek Parfit and David Lewis thought so. And maybe they were right, when considering the survival of specific persons. But could *we* survive as *different* people? If my memories were replaced by someone else's, could I still be *me*? I think it's possible—if my first-person perspective remained intact. If it's *me* experiencing the life of this other person, then it's a case of survival. The goal of this paper is to explore the possibility that psychological continuity needn't be necessary for the persistence of *you* or *I* if there is causal continuity between mental stages maintaining our same first-person perspective. To be clear, I deny that psychological continuity—as defined by Parfit and Lewis—is necessary for survival. But I believe first-person perspective continuity is a psychological phenomenon. I don't deny Lewis's definition of a person (moreover, I endorse it), but rather I offer that we can be different people.

Throughout this paper I will challenge the notion that we are fundamentally persons, and point at the possibility that we are something else—something that has the capacity to be more than one person. But I don't wish to define what that is in this paper. I will end with some general thoughts on the matter, but nothing conclusive. When I use the italicized pronouns *you* or *I* or *he/she*, I am referring to this nameless entity that I believe we are more fundamentally than we are persons. I will, however, outline in great detail why it is I believe we have the ability to be more than one person—namely, through first-person perspective continuity—thus leading to the idea that we must be something else.

## I Psychological and Causal Continuity (and the lack there of)

In short, psychological continuity encompasses remembering one's past, and carrying out the intentions and desires relevant to those memories while maintaining a general stability in character. Any change in psychologically continuant persons should be gradual. Parfit

and Lewis were two famous advocates of the idea that psychological continuity is that what matters in survival. And they both pointed to the necessary inclusion of causal continuity to ensure the right kind of relation holds between our mental stages to guarantee survival. This causal continuity is what distinguishes psychological continuity from a mere copy of our memories. It's what ensures that *you* survive, and not just a copy of you, if we can survive solely through the continuation of our mental lives.

In defining a *quasi*-memory, Parfit stated, "my belief is dependent upon this experience in the same way (whatever that is) in which a memory of an experience is dependent upon it" (1971). "Whatever that is" is meant to signify the necessary causal dependence required to ensure that a q-memory is not just a copy of a memory. Lewis included the requirement of "bonds of lawful causal dependence" in his explanation of the R-relation (1976). The R-relation is what holds between mental time-slices, or person-stages, as these moments are often called. It's what allows each memory to be psychologically continuous with the present. And as long as causal continuity is included in an account of psychological continuity, we're to take it that the checklist for the survival is complete: the person in question has indeed made it to the present person-stage. What does not allow for survival is an abrupt and total change in our mental lives (I will challenge this).

There are a variety of thought experiments available to test the sensibility of this theory: fission, fusion, brain transposition, etc. Brain continuity is usually present in these hypothetical cases because logic allows us to assume (to a great extent) that a brain can preserve psychological and causal continuity. Not to say this isn't a controversial idea, but rather it's relatively easy to accept that someone will survive if their brain survives—with their memory and mental life intact—wherever their brain happens to end up. For the most part, in regards to persons and survival, I think the psychological continuity theory holds up.

But there are some decidedly gray areas. For example, what happens if we erase a person's memory and replace it with a *copy* of someone else's memory? Consider two persons, Alpha and Beta. Alpha and Beta agree to an experiment that will allow for them to exchange bodies. But the experimenter doesn't take the proper measures necessary to ensure psychological (and causal) continuity. Instead, prior to erasing Alpha's memory, he only makes a copy of it. It's that copy that replaces Beta's memory in Beta's brain, and vice versa. This is to say: Alpha and Beta did not switch bodies at all. Let's turn our attention to what I will now refer to as the A-body person. The A-body person has Alpha's brain and Beta's memories. So who would feel the pain if a dog ran up and bit the A-body person on the leg? We can rule out Beta: we know that Beta did not survive in the mere copy of his memories, so he won't feel the pain. But Alpha, having none of his original memories and only those of Beta's, is not psychologically continuous with the present A-body person either. This is where I find things to be problematic.

According to Parfit and Lewis, because Alpha is not psychologically continuous with either the A-body person or the B-body person, Alpha no longer exists and therefore can't feel pain (or anything for that matter). Under this logic, the A-body person is a completely new person. Let's call him Charlie. Charlie has Alpha's brain (and body) and the copy of Beta's memories. If Parfit and Lewis are correct, Charlie (not Alpha) feels the dog biting his leg. And Charlie will carry on about his life in Alpha's body, with Beta's memories.

I interject. What's really going here? On the surface level, because I agree that psychological continuity is what matters in the survival of persons, this seems to be a fair claim to make: Charlie—the resulting new person residing in the A-body—feels the pain. But this is Alpha's brain. I don't think we can ignore the question—might Alpha and Charlie share the same first-person perspective? Those who *don't* hold that psychological continuity is necessary for the survival of a person might reason that Alpha just *thinks* he's Beta (and there is no new person, Charlie). This is a similar sentiment, though not quite the same. I propose the possibility that *he*, who was previously Alpha, *does* feel the pain: because *he* is now Charlie. I would like to explore the idea that Alpha is first-person perspective continuous with Charlie.

## II The First-Person Perspective

Before going any further, it's important to clarify exactly what I mean when I say "first-person perspective." Lynn Rudder Baker wrote extensively on her take of the first-person perspective, and I find it to be a good one:

A conscious being becomes self-conscious on acquiring a first-person perspective—a perspective from which one thinks of oneself as an individual facing a world, as a subject distinct from everyone else. (1998)

Baker went on to explain that there two grades of the first-person perspective, weak and strong. Dogs and infants fall under the weak grade category, and are limited to basic problem solving that shows that, for example, while an infant can't think of himself *as himself*, he can have a "certain perspective on his surroundings with himself as the origin" (1998). Baker held that the strong grade first-person perspective requires that one is able to think of oneself *as oneself*. That I can say, "I am a person who is having thoughts about being *this* person" is evidence of my own strong first-person perspective. While I'll come back to the infant's first-person perspective later, this paper's main focus is on the strong grade sort.

According to Baker, a person's prime persistence condition is the persistence of the *same* first-person perspective—as long as my first-person perspective remains intact I will continue to exist and I will continue to be a person (2011). This is where I would like to distinguish my view from Baker's and Lewis's. I agree with Lewis when he says a person is a "maximal R-interrelated aggregate of person-stages" and I believe that his definition of a person also requires that the same first-person perspective be preserved. It's probably included somewhere in the questions he left open about ensuring the R-relation (2011). But because there are certain life stages, infant stages for example, that are not clearly R-related, I allow that infants are something other than persons. But I need to assert that while I accept that *one* person requires psychological continuity *and* that the same first-person perspective remains intact, I believe that *we* can be more than one person. For *us* to persist as different persons does not require psychological continuity, but it does require sameness of first-person perspective. There are cases (both hypothetical and actual) that seem to conclude that we can maintain our same first-person perspective outside of the

realm of psychological continuity. Thus there might be some causal chain linking our mental stages—one that does not rely on memory—that allows the same firstperson perspective to survive as different persons. I will explore a couple of those cases now.

### **III Virtual Reality in the Future**

Imagine that—at some point in the future—there is new technology that allows for a virtual reality experience that is meant to instill empathy for others. On entering into the experience, measures are taken so that one's past memories are completely forgotten. The goal of the experience is to replace your memories with a copy of someone else's, someone from a completely different walk of life—typically someone with a hard life—so you can walk a mile in 7 their shoes, so to speak. Your memories are forgotten in order to prevent you from treating the experience as an amusement ride. You enter into the virtual world (via a virtual reality headset or what have you), and suddenly you become this person. Say this person lives in poverty, and their work involves hard manual labor that results in a lot of blisters on their hands. When the experience is over (the length of the experience might typically vary from a few hours to a few days), you are given back access to your original memories, but you keep the memories of the experience. As if emerging from a dream, you tell those around you that you were that person. You felt their pain, both emotional and physical. You felt it in the same immediate way you feel your own emotional and physical pain. You experienced that person's life via the same firstperson perspective that you experience your own life. And you walk away from the experience with a bit more empathy than you had before. It's not too hard to imagine, at the rate technology is going and the more we're coming to understand the brain—that this is something that could happen.

Suppose the experience expands to recreational use. And people can experience different adventurous and exciting lives as if they were their own. And then suppose some people, after years of enjoying the experience (and knowing without a doubt that *they* survive as these other people), decide to stay inside the virtual world and forego their actual lives forever. It seems this would be a case of survival (though not of the person, so of something else) without psychological continuity.

### **IV Dissociative Drugs**

There are instances of mental phenomena that mirror that of the hypothetical virtual reality case. These can be seen in cases involving certain dissociative drugs. Take salvia divinorum, for example. Those with experience with the drug have described its effect in detail: 8 upon first taking the drug they experience the feeling of being completely dissociated from their sense of self—having no memory of who they were prior to taking the drug, and becoming someone with completely different intentions who is in no way psychologically continuous with the person they consider themselves to be. These intentions can be outlandish to be sure—it's a dissociative drug after all—but nonetheless there is a definite break in psychological continuity. When the drug wears off, however, they remember both their pre-drug existence, and their existence within the psychosis, and both mental states share the same first-person perspective. Based on this: should the drug user have the unfortunate fate of

remaining in the state of psychosis with no memories of his former self, it could be reasoned that he would still have the same first-person perspective. Therefore we ought to allow:

$x = y$  if  $x$  and  $y$  share the same first-person perspective.

If  $x$  and  $z$  share the same first-person perspective, and  $y$  and  $z$  share the same first-person perspective, then it follows that  $x$  and  $y$  share the same first-person perspective. Therefore,  $x = y$ , even though  $x$  is not psychologically continuous with  $y$ .

This suggests to me that there exists causality between mental stages that ensures the persistence of the same first-person perspective without relying on memories.

So to return to the original case in question, whether or not he (who was previously Alpha) would feel pain if Charlie was bit in the leg—I think it's fair to say that if there is a causal chain linking his mental stages to preserve his first-person perspective, then yes, *he* would feel the pain. This is not to say that Alpha would feel the pain. Charlie feels the pain. I agree that persons require psychological continuity for survival. But *he* was Alpha and now *he* is Charlie. At least, I don't think we can rule out the possibility that this could be the case.

## V Infants and the First-Person Perspective

I mentioned before the notion of weak and strong grade first-person perspectives. Infants are thought to have a much more basic first-person perspective than that of say, a typical adult. So the question may arise, how do I know that I currently have the same first-person perspective that I had as an infant? After all, an infant has a first-person perspective comparable to a dog. But what separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom is that an infant's first-person perspective *will evolve* into the strong grade first-person perspective one expects to have later. As Baker put it, "Born with a rudimentary first-person perspective and a remote (or second-order) capacity to develop a robust first-person perspective, a human person gets to the robust stage in the natural course of development" (2014). The infant stages are necessary in the development of the human brain, the same brain that will be associated with the adult stages. The first-person perspective is weak grade at birth, but it *develops gradually* as the infant's brain develops and with it the senses, the ability to retain memories, and eventually—language. Language is key in being able to have thoughts like "I" or "me" that finally begin to shape the child's perception of self in a strong grade type of way.

Saying it's the *same* first-person perspective is not to say that it can't be broken into stages (I believe it can), or that it doesn't need some relation to connect it all together (I believe it does). I even hold that different people can share the same first-person perspective. It is "one thing" in the same way a person is "one thing" according to Lewis: one thing being an aggregate of many causally connected mental stages. But *my* first-person perspective is mine, and will continue to be mine for as long as *I* exist. And wherever it is, there *I* am, regardless if psychological continuity is preserved or not. I can separate the first-person perspective from our ability to be psychologically continuant because it's present before

our ability to retain memories—a necessary component of psychological continuity. And even if *I* never achieved the 10 ability to form memories, or if *I* lost that ability later in life—my first-person perspective will remain until *I* die, weak as it might be in these cases.

I draw attention to the infant's first-person perspective, not just to claim that we have the same first-person perspective from birth (therefore *we were* the infant), but also to point out an interesting situation the infant is in. The infant is not psychologically continuous with any person yet. Lewis might hold that an infant, with his weak grade perspective and abilities, is not yet a person at all. I don't disagree. Right now the infant has the potential to be *any* person, and who he turns out to be all depends on the circumstances he was born into. From this junction, persons seem rather arbitrary. What's not arbitrary is his first-person perspective. That he has a weak grade first-person perspective that will evolve into the strong grade sort is necessary for becoming a person. I imagine that the first-person perspective acts like a foundation for the person one will become. And this foundation holds, even if we become different people—gradually, or abruptly. There is no obvious evidence that points conclusively to the idea that if our memories are erased, so is our first-person perspective.

## **VI The FPP-Relation**

If the first-person perspective does, in fact, depend on its own causal chain to persist through time, then it must have its own relation of connectedness between mental stages. Let's call this the FPP-relation. The FPP-relation is to first-person perspective connectedness as the R-relation is to psychological connectedness. For example, in the failed body exchange case, we're wondering if the FPP-relation holds between the mental stages of Alpha and the mental stages of Charlie. But what about the I-relation? Lewis stated:

...if ever a stage is I-related to some future stage but R-related to none, then the platitude that what matters is the I-relation will disagree with the interesting thesis 11 that what matters is the R-relation. But no such thing can happen, I claim; so there can be no such disagreement (1976).

If by identity we mean the person we presently are, then I agree with what Lewis says here. But I'm tempted to object. If I'm correct about the first-person perspective and its ability to persist even if we become different persons, might our identity be tied up with the "something else" I believe we more fundamentally are? If I claim identity for the "something else" then the I-relation *would* hold between stages that are not R-related. But I will concede—and say that Lewis referred only to the identity of the person, and not to what we are more fundamentally.

The concession comes without much hesitation. A person, I believe, deserves its own identity account—and Lewis provided an excellent one. This is why I chose *not* to shift the title of "person" to the "something else." The death of a person is a death to be sure, even if *he* or *she* is now someone else. Even if we know our loved one lives on as a new person, nothing would keep us from mourning the person they were. In no way is this paper meant

to undermine the significance of persons, it is meant to explore the possibility that we are more. Because the I-relation is restricted to persons, and there is an absence of an identity account for the "something else", I will stick with "first-person perspective continuity."

## VII So What Matters?

In a way, I've left us with two identities to choose from. One we know and relate to—the person—the other is rather mysterious—the something else. Psychological continuity ensures the survival of the person, and that matters! I want to survive in such a way that I remember my family, my dreams, and my history, and I want my loved ones to survive and remember our lives together. But first-person perspective continuity ensures the survival of the first-person perspective, and that matters too. It matters, for example, whether or not it would still be my husband lying next to me even if he suffered from complete memory loss and no longer acted like himself. And it's possible that, in the future, people might willingly choose to forget who they are and live the virtual lives of different people. I think it's important to take both—psychological continuity and first-person perspective continuity—into account. Perhaps I'm just adding to what matters.

## VIII Conclusion

I have tried to show that *you* and *I* can persist without the necessity of being psychologically continuant persons. But in doing so I suggest that we can be different people. It's as though we're something that can have the property of being one person or another, or that might never have the property of being a person at all. But I don't know what that something is. Perhaps we are simply the first-person perspective itself—just a conscious entity aware of itself with the potential to be many persons or nonpersons. And perhaps that conscious entity is the manifestation of the unique neural syntax of our brains, and because our memories are only a fraction of that, we can survive without them. After all, the successful thought experiments that logically allow for causal continuity all involve brain continuity. But I can only speculate.

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