

Pearls and Personal Identity

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Can Strawson's view of the self be reconciled with psychological
criteria of personal identity?

1. Strawson and SESMETs

Recently, Galen Strawson has spent much time investigating the ontology of self. He has two initial questions, the phenomenological question, 'What is the nature of our experience of self?', and the metaphysical question, 'Does the self exist?' In regards to the former, he puts forward the following list. Our experience of the self is of, generally:

- [1] a subject of experience, a conscious feeler and thinker
- [2] a thing, in some interestingly robust sense
- [3] a mental thing, in some sense
- [4] a thing that is single at any given time, and during any unified or hiatus-free period of experience
- [5] a persisting thing, a thing that continues to exist across hiatuses in experience
- [6] an agent
- [7] something that has a certain character or personality.

These are, Strawson argues, the general characteristics of our experience of self. However, we could still experience something as the self without all [1] – [7] being met. Strawson identifies [1] – [4] as necessary to any experience of a self. If any of [1] – [4] were not met, Strawson argues, a thing would not be a self. And here we arrive at the metaphysical question: is there anything that meets [1] – [4]?

Enter the SESMET (Subjects of Experience that are **Single Mental Things**). SESMETs are the basic discrete units of consciousness. In human beings they last for three seconds or so before being replaced by another SESMET and this collection of consecutive SESMETs, each separate and distinct like a string of pearls, constitutes mental life. Of course in a given individual there might be only one substance, one SESMET, one self. Such a single enduring SESMET is how Strawson conceives of God. However our conscious experience is far more stuttered, with definite gaps every few seconds which are blended by our brains into phenomenologically continuous experience. Each time experience is 'rebooted' it is a new process that is taking place, a process that is ontologically distinct. Strawson is a materialist. All processes are physical. Everything that is physical is a thing. Hence, it is a new, distinct thing each time consciousness is rebooted. A new SESMET.

SESMETs are [1] subjects of experience; [2] things (given Strawson's materialism); [3] of their nature mental; [4] single units. They therefore meet the necessary conditions for being a self. Whether they are sufficient is another matter. As Strawson concedes, it is not obvious that they are. For our purposes though, we will assume [1] – [4] are sufficient. What we will consider is, if Strawson's account is true, whether a view of the self as a SESMET can be reconciled with psychological criteria of personal identity. This does not commit us to the antecedent. Therefore, we will not consider the plausibility of Strawson's account.

Assuming this, we have a score of selves existing and being replaced in each of us every waking minute. If personal identity over time is a matter of the continuation of a SESMET, then we would have a substance criterion of personal identity by which none of us last more than several seconds. What is to be done?

2. SESMETs and Psychological Reductionism

For the Parfitian what determines personal identity is not the persistence of a substance through time but psychological continuity. Remember our favourite example, the transplant case. When we take Bill's cerebrum out of his terminally ill body and put it into Jill's old body (she conveniently died of serious brain disease five minutes ago but left her body completely intact), who is the person that now wakes up in Jill's old body? The person who wakes up is psychologically continuous with Bill. We Parfitians say the person in Jill's old body is Bill. And most people, after some initial shock, would presumably manifest their agreement with us by treating the person in Jill's old body as Bill: continuing their various relationships where they left off and talking fondly of old times.

But Parfitians are not content with this account of personal identity. Imagine Bill's cerebrum is split into two and for argument's sake, that both halves are sufficient for full unimpeded psychological continuity if implanted into new bodies. We now have two people, Bill-A and Bill-B, who are psychologically continuous with Bill before the operation. Which is Bill? They cannot both be Bill because identity is a one-one relation, the relation between a thing and itself. But both, taken alone, seem to be sufficient for being Bill; after all, if one half of the cerebrum were destroyed during the operation and we subsequently had only Bill-A, we would say he is Bill. Saying neither Bill-A nor Bill-B is Bill seems to be equivalent to saying Bill has died. How could a double success be a failure?

The language of identity is insufficient for dealing with split-brain and other such cases. Because of this, Parfitians make use of the term 'survival'. This allows us to say that Bill has survived in both Bill-A and Bill-B.

How then might we reconcile this Parfitian view of personal identity with Strawson's view of the self? Here are three problems: (A) Selves according to Parfit's account are very different from Strawson's. According to Parfit, selves

are non-branching series of mental states that are (sufficiently) psychologically connected. For clarity henceforth Parfitian selves will be referred to as ‘p-selves’. (B) The persistence conditions of SESMETs are very different from the persistence conditions of p-selves. (C) Parfit emphasises that on his account, there is no further thing underlying p-selves, that is to say, there is no thing which is an underlying subject of experience.

Let’s take (A) first. The thing to do is to supplement Parfit’s account, adding in SESMETs. This looks problematic because it seems we have two contrary definitions of the same thing, viz. of the self. But this is not necessarily so. We might say instead that we have one single word ‘self’ which is being used to refer to two distinct things. So now we have different terms for each referent, ‘SESMET’ and ‘p-self’. Both capture aspects of our unified phenomenological experience of the self which is why, confusingly, these aspects are referred to using the same term. Looking back at Strawson’s list of the general characteristics of our experience of self, we see that while the SESMET meets [1] – [4], a p-self certainly meets [7] and possibly others as well, such as [3], [5] and [6].

In the light of the above discussion (B) does not look so problematic. We have a word ‘self’ which picks out distinct referents that embody different aspects of a single phenomenological experience, the experience of self. As we are talking of two distinct referents, it is not problematic for them to have different persistence conditions.

The question arises how though, if what we are at root are SEMETs, we can still use psychological criteria of personal identity. But it is clear that when we are asking about the persistence of a person, John, we are not asking whether any particular SESMET has persisted. Instead, we are asking whether the person before you is psychologically continuous with the person you spoke to earlier. That is why if you ask after a horrible accident whether John has survived, you

will feel somewhat cheated by the answer, “Well, no, the John you knew hasn’t survived because SESMETs only last three seconds.” What you want to know is whether the person you knew has survived, whether in his original body or some other.

Of course, one may in some circumstances be asking about the SESMET. For example, if one asks “What am I?”, a perfectly adequate response is “a SESMET.” Other sensible responses might be, “A collection of consecutive SESMETs”, “a p-self,” “a person” and “a human being.”

The terms we use to refer to ourselves and others are deeply ambiguous. In any one circumstance, such as in the question above, we may not know what the speaker is directing his question towards. The question ‘What am I?’ has at least four readings. It might be a question about the self, in which case the answer is a SESMET or a string of consecutive SESMETs. It might be a question about the p-self and then the answer would be the relevant series of mental states. It might be a question about the person, in which case the answer is a single, non-branching line of psychological continuity. Or it might be a question about the organism, the human being, in which case the answer is a certain collection of organic matter organized in a particular way. We – you, me and the next door neighbour – are all four of these things: SESMETs, p-selves, animals, and people.

When it comes to questions of persistence, we can of course enquire into the continuation of either the SESMET, the p-self, the animal or the person. All clearly have different persistence conditions. For example, I am not the same SESMET that I was when I started writing this essay but I am the same p-self. I am the same person that I was twelve years ago when I started secondary school but arguably I am not the same p-self. I am the same animal as the foetus that was in my mother’s womb twenty-five years ago but not the same person. Similarly, Bill is the same person and the same p-self that he was before the

transplant operation but he is neither the same animal nor SESMET. But it is clear in general contexts when people ask ambiguous questions about someone's persistence – they usually are to be understood as about the continuation of the person. Clearly if I ask you whether the man before us is the same that I met last night at a party where I enjoyed a little too much from my glass, I do not want you to reply that it is a different SESMET, nor would I be content with you telling me it is the same animal. I want to know whether this person is psychologically continuous with the one last night so I know whether I need to grovel recantfully about my poor conduct.

Still we have not dealt with (C). To this I think there is no obvious answer; here Strawson and Parfit are in direct contradiction. We cannot cast off Strawson's claim that there is a thing that is an underlying subject of experience as that is necessary to his account. If we are to have a reconciliation then, we must abandon Parfit's claim that there is no underlying subject. I think this can be done whilst still keeping the account distinctly Parfitian as we have just done but you might argue that the account is not in fact Parfitian just because it includes an underlying thing that is the subject of experience. That is, you could argue the rejection of an underlying subject is a necessary feature for any Parfitian account. I see no good reason for this but if you (or Parfit) insist on it, at least we can say that the idea of Strawsonian selves can be reconciled with a psychological criterion of personal identity. This is the answer to the question in the essay title. We may answer yes.

3. Criticism

(Q.1) You have shown that when we ask questions about personal identity, what we are generally enquiring about is the persistence of a person. But now we know that people are constituted by SESMETs, shouldn't we rather

adjust what we mean when we ask such questions? Indeed, perhaps the ambiguity arose just because we did not know what we were talking about. Now that we do there is no ambiguity.

(A.1) My first comment on the above is that it is consistent with the phenomena but is an inferior explanation. It might be the case that ambiguities in the questions arose from ambiguities in our understanding. But we certainly should not change what we mean now that we are clear on what is being spoken about. Talking about the persistence of SESMETs is of very little practical use. When it comes to atoning for embarrassing myself at a party, it is of no import whether it is the same SESMET – what one wants to know is whether the individual at the party experienced my poor conduct and consequently remembers it.

These remarks also suffice to do away with the second part of the objection; the point is that, now that we are clear what we are talking about, there is no longer any ambiguity in the question. The fact is that most of the time what we are enquiring about is someone's personal identity, understood as non-branching psychological continuity, because that is what we are mostly interested in. We might now appreciate that one is, at root, constituted by chains of SESMETs, but this does not change the focus of our attention.

(Q.2) To reconcile a “pearl view” of the self and a Parfitian understanding of personal identity, you have argued that each of us is constituted by (at least) four separate entities: the SESMET, the p-self, the person, and the animal. Is there then a problem of too many thinkers? Every thought you have is also had, identically and indistinguishably, by three others. And does this not lead to epistemological problems about which you are?

(A.2) The problem of too many thinkers because each of us is both a person and an animal was dealt with intelligently by Parfit in *We Are Not Human Beings*. In every instance a thought is had by both a person and a human

animal. There are not too many thinkers here because the person is a part of the animal – the thinking, feeling part. In the case of a vehicle, both the engine and the car make a revving noise from my garage. But there are not too many revvers, the engine is a part of the car. I merely expand this logic to encompass p-selves and SESMETs. In every case, a thought is had by a human animal, a person, a p-self and a SESMET. There is no problem here. The person is the conscious part of the animal and the thoughts it has constitute the p-self. Both person and p-self are constituted by SESMETs. Animals, persons and p-selves thus have thought derivatively, in virtue of being at least partly constituted by SESMETs. The objection misleadingly assumes that a thought is had by ‘four separate entities’. The thought is had by four distinct entities, but by three derivatively.

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