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## The essential moral self

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## ABSTRACT

It has often been suggested that the mind is central to personal identity. But do all parts of the mind contribute equally? Across five experiments, we demonstrate that moral traits—more than any other mental faculty—are considered the most essential part of identity, the self, and the soul. Memory, especially emotional and autobiographical memory, is also fairly important. Lower-level cognition and perception have the most tenuous connection to identity, rivaling that of purely physical traits. These findings suggest that folk notions of personal identity are largely informed by the mental faculties affecting social relationships, with a particularly keen focus on moral traits.

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In 1848, a 13-pound tamping iron shot through the skull of a 25-year-old man named Phineas Gage, taking a chunk of his brain with it. Formerly mild-mannered and responsible, Gage emerged from the accident impulsive and foul-tempered. His character changed so markedly that those who knew him said he was “no longer Gage” (Macmillan, 2000). Likewise, in describing the radical memory loss experienced in the wake of Korsokov’s syndrome, Oliver Sacks (Sacks, 1985) wonders whether his patient has become “de-souled”.

When someone undergoes dramatic mental change, their numerical identity—whether they’re the same person as they were before—can seem to become disrupted.<sup>1</sup> While the philosophical literature has focused on metaphysical claims about personal identity, the scope of this paper is descriptive: what drives lay theories of numerical identity

across different sorts of mental transformation? What do people consider the most essential parts of the self?

Some philosophical accounts of personal identity have advocated the importance of physical continuity (Ayer, 1936; Williams, 1973; Thomson, 1997), but most current discussions revolve around psychological continuity (Locke, 1690/2009; Parfit, 1971; Shoemaker & Swinburne, 1984; Unger, 1990; Olson, 2003). Folk intuitions largely accord with the psychological view. When children are asked to imagine what would happen to a hamster put in a “duplication” device, they predict the duplicate will inherit the original hamster’s physical traits, but not its memories (Hood, Gjerseoe, & Bloom, 2012). Young children place more weight on behavioral changes than physical changes in determining identity continuity, even when that physical change involves a brain transplant (Johnson, 1990). It is only after children learn the brain is the seat of the mind that brain transplants are seen as altering identity (Gottfried, Gelman, & Schultz, 1999). (As Dennett (1978) points out, the brain is the only organ of the body where it is preferable to be the donor than the recipient.) The intuition that the mind is an identity-conferring and body-independent entity persists into adulthood (Corriveau, Pasquini, & Harris, 2005; Blok, Newman, & Rips, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> Some philosophers claim that personal identity is absolute: you’re either Nina or you’re not (Butler, 1736/2008; Reid, 1785/1850). Empirical research, however, finds that people judge a partially modified self to be capable of surviving partially (Libby & Eibach, 2007; Bartels & Urminsky, 2011; Bartels, Kvaran, & Nichols, 2013), consistent with the idea that identity can be graded and relative (Hume, 2000; Parfit, 1971).

The mind may be central to notions of the self, but are all mental faculties equally important? This question has received scant attention, so here we lay out some possibilities. Perhaps identity persistence depends only on the magnitude of mental change. In that case, the mental faculties relating to overall functionality and consciousness—such as perception and low-level cognition—might be the most potent determinants of identity. In spite of their broad-ranging functional impact however, it is far from clear that basic cognitive faculties are foundational to identity: they are not terribly unique from person to person, and have little relation to why we would care about an individual. Indeed, this may be a domain of the mind that contributes only minimally to personal identity.

A long philosophical tradition links identity to memory, particularly autobiographical memory (Locke, 1690/2009; Shoemaker, 1959; Williams, 1970; Parfit, 1971; Perry, 2002). Autobiographical memories provide a continuous inner narrative which may be required for a unified sense of self. Social scientists would also predict memory to be important, though on different grounds. A number of theories propose that what matters most to social and group identity is distinctiveness (McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976; Nelson & Miller, 1995; Vignoles, Chrysoschoou, & Breakwell, 2000; Blanton & Christie, 2003). To the extent that one's collection of memories represents a uniquely identifying set, memory ought to play a central role in the construction of identity. Indeed, recent empirical research on numerical identity makes precisely this point, that episodic memory is paramount because of its novelty (Hood et al., 2012). Previous work has found that memory loss disrupts identity judgments (Blok et al., 2005; Nichols & Bruno, 2010), though these studies do not compare memory to other mental traits.

Memory is not the only part of the mind that can be distinctive. Desires and preferences—such as liking archeology, being afraid of snakes, and enjoying adventure—exhibit high heterogeneity between individuals, as do personality traits. Dispositional traits have long been considered at the heart of person perception (Allport, 1937), and people report that personality traits and preferences are an essential part of who a person is (Haslam, Bastian, and Bissett (2004), Gelman, Heyman, and Legare (2007)). Whether these traits have direct relevance to numerical identity, and how they might compare with other types of mental content, remains untested.

While memory often receives headlining status in discussions of identity, some philosophers have suggested that morality is an important (Parfit, 1984) or perhaps even the most important (Prinz, in press; Prinz & Nichols, in press) part of personal identity. A small but growing litany of evidence points towards this possibility. People are reluctant to take pharmaceutical enhancements for traits that are considered fundamental to the self; two moral traits (empathy and kindness) top this list (Riis, Simmons, & Goodwin, 2008). Children judge moral goodness to be a more stable dispositional trait than other personality traits, including intelligence (Heyman & Dweck, 1998; Haslam et al., 2004), and moral attributes are predominant in person perception (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). Willingness to attribute moral

change to the true self is contingent upon one's pre-existing moral beliefs (Knobe, 2005; Newman, Knobe, & Bloom, 2014). Finally, the concept of the soul—by some counts a placeholder for the self at its very pith—carries with it strong moral connotations (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997; Bering, 2006; Richert & Harris, 2006).

Our aim in this paper is to take a systematic approach to determining which parts of the mind are most central to personal identity. Of particular interest is the possibility that moral traits are more essential than any other mental feature, including those that provide functionality, distinctiveness, or personal narrative (henceforth 'the essential moral self hypothesis').

We test this hypothesis across five diverse scenarios. In Study 1, we examine how different forms of neuropsychological impairment impact judgments of numerical identity. In Study 2, we look at how change to a broad array of traits brought about by voluntary pharmaceutical intervention affects identity persistence. In Studies 3 and 4, we extend these findings to the soul concept, by probing intuitions about the properties a soul exports when it leaves the body and is placed into a new one. Finally, in Study 5, we measure identity continuity in the face of age-related cognitive change.

## 1. Study 1: The brain transplant

This study examined the impact of cognitive impairments upon willingness to attribute continued identity to a person following brain trauma. We adapted a method used in previous research for studying numerical identity (Blok et al., 2005). In the original paradigm, subjects read a story where a man living in the not-distant future, Jim, gets into a car accident and needs a brain transplant. After the brain transplant, Jim is either psychologically identical or has lost his memories. The authors found that identity (to wit: "Is the transplant recipient still Jim?") is more likely to change after a discontinuity of mental content than a discontinuity of brain matter alone (Blok et al. (2005)).

As we were interested in distinguishing among different kinds of psychological change, we constructed variations where Jim selectively loses different parts of his mind. In the wake of the surgery, Jim either experiences no cognitive change (control condition), inability to recognize objects (visual object agnosia), loss of autobiographical memories (amnesia), loss of desires (apathy), or loss of moral conscience (see Appendix A for text of the stories).

If physical continuity alone is sufficient to disrupt identity, then these cognitive changes should have no additional effect on identity. Likewise, if the mind is uniformly more connected with the self than the body, then all psychological changes should alter identity more than physical changes. The inclusion of visual object agnosia was intended as a test of whether all cognitive deficits—including, in this case, one leading to a profound functional impairment—would dramatically affect identity.

Apathy is a common a clinical syndrome in neuropsychiatric disorders, and is distinct from clinical depression (Starkstein, Petracca, Chemerinski, & Kremer, 2001).

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