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Personal identity, functionalism and the extended mind

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Abstract

In the last thirty years, advancements made in neurobiology and computer science have profoundly changed the ways in which we conceive and regard ourselves. Within this context, metaphysical questions about personal identity become intertwined with real, practical concerns and ethical considerations. In this paper we will examine the extended mind thesis (Clark & Chalmers, 1998) and what it entails for personal identity. Adopting a psychological continuity view restated in functionalist terms, we conclude that mind extension is currently impossible, but might be possible in the future. Ultimately, we maintain that functionalism paints a very optimistic picture about our psychological persistence conditions.

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1. Introduction

From ancient times to the present day, philosophy of mind has presented us with some of the most intractable problems imaginable. Leaving aside the “hard” problem of consciousness (Chalmers, 1995), issues regarding mental causation, intentionality and our seemingly effortless access to our private mental states have generated not only an enormous body of literature, but also vigorous debates that continue to the present day. In numerous ways, the topic

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of the present paper touches all of these subjects, being preoccupied with one of the most intimate, if not the most intimate concept that we can have – namely, our personal identity.

In the last thirty years, advancements made in neurobiology, as well as computer science, have profoundly changed the ways in which we regard and conduct ourselves. These broad lines of research have ultimately given birth to new perspectives over the issue of personal identity, either extending the mind over parts of the environment, or reducing the notion of a person to its biological, animal form. Within the given context, the main purpose of this paper is to investigate the necessary and sufficient conditions that ensure the persistence of a person such as to avoid the problematic consequences of both the extended mind thesis and the somatic approach (e.g. Olson, 1997, for the latter). As such, our concern here will be rather metaphysical than epistemic in character.

While giving an exhaustive treatment of the literature is impossible due to the limited space, we will begin here by following the distinction made by Parfit (1982) between the Simple View of personal identity and the more articulate, Complex View, that takes psychological or somatic continuity as relevant criteria for judging identity relations. In the second section we will briefly discuss the extended mind thesis (Clark & Chalmers, 1998), or what Adams and Ainszawa (2001) called “contingent transcranialism”, further exposing the consequences of this approach in drawing the lines of the self. Finally, in the last section we will argue that even though extending the boundaries of the mind through artificial means is not only a logical possibility, but also a nomological one, such extensions are currently impossible. From a functionalist point of view, extension requires the existence of an underlying single mechanism that causally bridges the mind states occurring on different vehicles. If this is a desirable option is, of course, another question which we cannot give a full and elaborate treatment here.

2. Psychological continuity as necessary and sufficient for persistence

The Simple View / Complex View distinction was introduced by Derek Parfit in the 1980s in order to describe and classify the contrasting perspectives on personal identity that have been advanced in the Western tradition of thought. While this dichotomy certainly has its shortcomings, it is nonetheless a useful intellectual tool that provides important insight into the problem. In broad strokes, following Parfit, according to the Simple View of the non-reductionist tradition, personal identity is a separate “further fact” (Parfit, 1982, p. 227) that cannot be reduced to mental or physical continuity (e.g. Chrisholm, 1976). Often, partisans of this perspective also adopt the idea that we are *res cogitans* substances, immaterial Cartesian egos or spirits that will continue to exist well after our physical bodies are destroyed, but some may also consider the possibility that we are actually physical entities of a different kind, yet undiscovered by physics (Parfit, 1984, p.210). Strictly speaking, the distinction introduced earlier is actually more concerned with the question of a person’s persistence conditions or what matters for survival than with the metaphysical nature of a person. Some philosophers (e.g. Wilkes, 1998, viif) consider such problems inextricably linked, but here we prefer to be reserved on this issue. However improbable and strange it may seem in the present age dominated by physicalism, the Simple View is “almost certainly the default folk view” (Matthews, 2010, p. 183). Understanding how thinking entities can persist in time but not in space is enormously difficult and, due to many other considerations coming from empirical research, we will leave aside the Simple View and concentrate on the much more articulate Complex perspective.

In nuce, whether we talk about a somatic or a psychological approach, those who propose a Complex understanding of identity relations are “reductionists” in the sense that they consider sub-personal facts to determine necessary and sufficient conditions for the persistence of a person. The most popular such view is undeniably the psychological continuity one, although recently, Animalism has gathered a sufficient amount of supporters. Carrying a certain Lockean flavour in their analyses, adepts of the psychological approach follow the British empiricist in considering that what matters for personal continuity ultimately revolves around that entity being a “thinking, intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places” (Locke, 1689, II.xxvii.9). Of course, as Reid and Butler have discovered in the eighteenth century (see Perry, 2002, p. 84), appeals to memory cannot get us very far because it is an unreliable mental faculty. First, forgetting an episode from one’s life violates transitivity, which is impossible for identity relations according to the formal rules of logic. Real life conditions such as retrograde and anterograde amnesia further complicate the picture, leading us to believe that an individual either becomes another person after the accident (in the first case) or

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