

# Memory and personal identity



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Arguably, explaining the complex issue of personal identity and philosophy of the mind (memory) has been among the facets that have dominated many discussions in psychology. Personal identity has a lot to do with aspects of cognitive psychology whereas memory deals a lot with the philosophy of the mind (Greenwood 336). The later has been a field of academic discipline since ancient times of Aristotle although to the contemporary times of Descartes. Arguments have been generated based on supposed interrelationship between the two disciplines. According to Ross & Wilson, personal identity and philosophy of the mind seem to ignore each other even though they deal with the mental perspective (25). Admittedly, memory and personal identity do relate with each other in numerous ways and none either can stand-alone.

Psychologists and philosophers have put studies and theories forward alike but differentiating and giving explanations to the two aspects has aggravated them. Locke postulated that memory does not consist of similitude of the body or the mind but when it comes to aspects of

consciousness, they can be backdated to previous past actions and this has an effect of touching the identity of an individual. Consequently, it leads to the notion of self-identity being evaluated in terms of series of linked memories. Alternatively, Hume related personal identity to periodic memories, which in turn consists of experiences, and episodic memories of life events. Therefore, he argued that memories are vital parts to self-identity. For instance, loss of memory leads to the loss of personal identity as evidenced to patients who suffer because of memory loss. He summarized by asserting that memory is exceptional to human beings. Thomas Reid reiterated that memory and personal identity have elements of mental states and thusly represent and store information regarding various causal factors. Accordingly, things remembered are not recalled from previous experiences but rather events experienced previously are recalled. His studies regarding the memory were not only based on the sake of the memory but also its theoretical connection with the idea of personal identity.

## **Personal Identity**

Issues regarding to personal identity are best approached from a psychological perspective that maintains that an individual is defined by periodic mental events (Greenwood 340). This entails undertaking thinking experiments with regard to cases dealing with brain transfer and the manner in which individuals brain actions are changed. Additionally, it entails the determination of whether things to do with mind or the body remains unchanged.

## **The problems of personal identity**

Generally, personal identity entails the evaluation of questions arising from the nature of being human. Such questions do cover large areas of human lives, which are certain to happen repeatedly. For instance, the “ I” feeling is majorly featured in issues dealing with personal identity. Questions commonly asked include, who am I? What am I? What happens when I die? (Johansson 196) This has led to the generation of diversified opinions regarding the definition of the problem of personal identity (Greenwood 344). Arguably, this problem entails giving logical account of both sufficient and necessary conditions of individuals and events identified at different periods. Undoubtedly, each individual has an element of personal identity, which exists regardless of personal traits. There exists the thing that enables them to be identified through time and at a time. Alternatively, in situations where personal identity is existent, the soul will definitely be around. Therefore, it will not be wrong for personal identity to be assumed to mean personality. Locke identified that the likeness of an individual consists of the same uniqueness in the respective mental substance (Johansson 204).

Personal continuity has been put forward to provide a tool of analyzing personal identity. This is achieved through the provisions of the sufficient and necessary conditions of needed to identify the person. It revolves around the identification of characteristic traits and/or features at given point in time. Alternatively, another identity problem is the explanation of any existing links between the mind and the body, specifically the bodily and mental processes. For instance, majority of perceived human experiences are dependent on the changes occurring in the surrounding. Lastly,

consciousness is believed to be a significant factor that influences the identity of an individual. In this situation, the essence the soul and the body do not play a major role in the determination of personal identity but rather consciousness of the mind. Locke reiterated that individuals are the same inwardly to the point of being conscious of their past and future thinking and deeds in the same way that they are conscious of their current actions and thoughts. It is evident from the perspective that personal identity consists of consciousness identity rather than the substance identity. This brings in the significance and interrelationship of memory to personal identity.

## **Memory**

An individual can define himself by recalling things that have occurred to him in his past. This entails revisiting preservation of imprinted images from previous experiences, which had been stored in the memory (Baumeister 13). Additionally, it exhibits the significance of memory and its contributions to the conscious mind. Therefore, memory can be defined as the part in an individual that is responsible for storing information, accounting for reasons against actions undertaken, and the conscious part that controls thoughts and actions.

Conversely, the act of being conscious occurs because of thinking actions, a fact that makes individuals to act differently from one another. This leads to the individual being distinct from others and therefore leading to the categorization of personal identity of the individual in question. Nonetheless, consciousness can be backdated to previous thoughts and actions, leading to further revelation of the individual's identity. An individual's memory can be traced to five distinct selves that enable one to remember events that have

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occurred in his life (Baumeister 15). The selves include the ecological, interpersonal, extended, private, and conceptual.

The ecological self concerns itself with perceived relations from the perspectives of the surrounding environment. Extended self has more to do with autobiographic events and are best explained using the episodic memory theory. It entails taking account of all events that have occurred in the life of the individual at different periods. Moreover, interpersonal self deals with particular relations concerning the individual as a living organism and his relationships with his fellow human beings (Schechtman 15). On the other hand, the private self deals with personal soliloquies and qualitative experiences. Finally, the conceptual self of the memory comes from self-representation and constructed thoughts giving account of what happened. These factors have made it complex for philosophers and psychologists to draw distinctions on how the various varieties of memory were applied.

### **Interrelationship of Memory and Personal Identity**

Personal identity and memory are related in many aspects throughout the continuity of an individual's life. From the discussion and analysis of Personal Identity, it became evident that the identity of a person is dependent on a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that must be fulfilled over a given time. Personal identity cannot be effected without memory aspects and therefore the two are interrelated. For this reason, memory forms the necessary condition for personal identity. Perhaps, the identification of the necessary condition will aid in narrowing down the process of personal identity (Schechtman 9).

Memory must therefore be remembered at all periods that an individual is alive. This leads to the arrangement of memory in different hierarchies depending on its significance in revealing a person's identity. Therefore, memories are then categorized into short term and long term and the necessary memory for purposes of revealing the identity of an individual is the long-term memory (Johnston 112). Alternatively, this type of memory can be further categorized as either being implicit or explicit. The latter refers to memories having true value in addition to being able to be proven as true or false. This is vital in situations where experiences from someone's life are recalled keeping in mind accuracy elements. Implicit memories refer to memories that lack true value and they include common skills and individual habits. Consequently, explicit memories can further be categorized into two distinct categories that related to the experience and life of an individual, namely; events and facts. Memories dealing with facts are independent and unrelated and therefore they are recalled separately. For instance, when a person recalls a photograph of a lion, stands separated from another unrelated photograph of a beautiful flower. Although they are both factual events, the circumstances of recalling them are unrelated and are not connected in any way whatsoever. Alternatively, one event precedes from another and therefore memories that deal with life events are usually related. When being recalled, these events must be associated and loss of memory of one particular event hinders the remembrance of the other. In the above example, if the image of the lion and the beautiful flower were read in a book or newspaper, they must be associated when recalling the incidence (Johnston 111). Mention of one event will elicit thoughts of the other event.

Finally, the memory of autobiography plays a significant role in the determination of an individual's identity. This type of memory entails presentation of an exceptional personal experience whereby periodic accounts of events must be associated together. Forgetting a particular event leads to loss of track and therefore personal identity becomes hard to be traced. For instance, patients who suffer from memory loss usually forget their experiences and therefore find it difficult to account for their personal identities.

## **Conclusion**

Although the explanation for the interrelationship between the personal identity and memory has been a complex issue to psychologists and philosophers alike, the two aspects are dependent on one another (Greenwood 335). For instance, personal identity cannot be determined without the necessary and sufficient conditions being fulfilled. Without a recall of the life event of an individual, identification of the self becomes quite a daunting task. Therefore, the significance of memory is evidenced in such a situation. Admittedly, memory is the necessary condition for the identification of personal identity and without it, nothing much can be accomplished regarding personal identity. This is evidenced in patients suffering from memory loss who end up forgetting their true personal identities. Finally, the true self-identity depends on the recall of long-term experiences and this can only be retrieved from the memory (Schechtman 22).