

The theories of personal identity - a study

[Philosophy](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

There are many different theories of personal identity that are concerned with the question of who we are and what compromises our identity. Separate from identity theories are solutions to the mind/body problem, which tries to figure out how our thoughts and minds are related to our physical body. After reading about each of these theories I have decided that I believe the memory theory of personal identity and the identity theory solution to the mind/body problem. The memory theory says that we know who someone is based on their memories. If someone can recall something happening to them in the past, it means they are the same person now as they were then. For the mind/body problem, I chose physicalism, more specifically the identity theory. This theory proposes that the mind and brain are the same thing. If something happens to your brain, it will affect your mind. In this way, mental states are the same as physical brain states, and specific changes to the brain change your mind. I think these two are the most plausible theories and complement each other.

I believe the memory theory is the most plausible of all of the theories. It makes logical sense that if we can remember something happening to us, then we are that person who that event happened to. Like the illusion theory, it allows for slight changes in identity while also having one cohesive self, like the soul or body theory. As Nils Ch. Rauhut puts it, the memory theory can be considered “ a psychological connection between different life stages,” (Rauhut 118). As humans, our experiences at different parts of our lives arguably define who we are, and the ability to remember those experiences happening to us proves that we actually experienced that specific event. In this way, the memories we have make us who we are. The

memory theory is also easily provable, for if we want to find out someone's identity we just ask them questions they would know. Memories are used to verify identity all of the time. I also believe in identity theory because it seems the most believable. Mental states are undoubtable brain states, as it has been scientifically proven that damage to the brain can affect the way a person acts. Our thoughts and emotions we feel are simply a process of neural responses. I believe this theory is most plausible because it is also the simplest answer. If our brain makes all these connections every day, it makes sense that what goes on in our minds is a consequence of this. This explains mental problems as simply being chemical imbalances, and gives a reason to why we act the way we act. The memory theory and the identity theory are compatible because memories are also caused by connections in the brain. We experience things and neurons link in our brains to form "pictures" in our minds. Our brain's connections allow us to recall events that happened to us. This, if you believe the memory theory, creates our identity. We could not have memories if our brain and mind were not intrinsically connected to each other.

The consequences if these theories are true would not be very large. We usually ask people about themselves when meeting them, which relies on memory, and our entire justice system is based on people recalling things that happened to them or something they saw. Our whole knowledge of society and the social norm is based on observations which turn into memories. "The situation of women within a given sociohistorical set of circumstances, despite the individual variation in each woman's experience...has a unity that can be described," (Young 142). Iris Marion

Young discusses how gender roles in society are artificial, and this can be linked to the memory theory. If I am correct and memory makes our identities, then masculine and feminine traits are only taken on after experiencing them in society. If someone wants to be considered a male they would use their memories to figure out what is masculine and imitate that. However, to accept this as true we would have to be aware that people can lie about memories or create false ones. Additionally, to accept the body theory would not require much, as many already know that scientifically, brains are linked to thoughts. We would just have to understand that a body and a "soul", in this case a mind, might be more closely related than we think.

There are certain problems with these approaches. For one, as stated above, people can have false memories. Additionally, people with diseases such as Alzheimer's may lose their memories. Are they the same person as before? I would argue no, since memory makes you who you are, the lack of your old memories means your identity is different. It may be hard for people to accept, but to accept this theory we need to be aware that our identities can change over time. However, we can say that even if these people remember a time when they did remember a specific event, they are still that same person. This concept of indirect memories helps rectify the problem of losing memories, for as long as we know we used to remember something we are still that same person. As for the body theory, some like John Searle say that we can still have a mind without a brain. "Image that your brain is entirely replaced by silicon chips...the sequence of your mental life remains unaffected," (Searle 65). Searle argues that even if your brain was simply a

bunch of chips, you would still be able to think and feel. In order to account for this we would need to accept that you do not need a “ brain” so much as a physical component to process mental states. As many people are used to associating brains with thoughts, this would be a troubling concept for some to grasp. These problems with these theories illustrate the amount of trust put in memories, as well as the eagerness of most to accept that we cannot think without brains. Although these obstacles may seem large, I believe we just need to be accepting of a more fluid identity due to losing memories, as well as understand that even if other beings do not have brains like us, they still can be considered connected to a mind.

This perspective of combining the memory theory and the identity theory fits in with my epistemological view of empiricism, more specifically indirect realism. Indirect realism says that when we encounter physical objects, they exist in some way but are mostly a collection of perspectives. This fits in with how memories make one’s identity. Memories are made from experiences and being able to sense things is necessary to live these experiences. As I stated in my epistemology paper, our experiences are simply just made up of what we sense and perceive. We would have nothing to base memories on if we did not see things from different perspectives. As our experiences make up our memories, it stands to reason that indirect realism is necessary for the memory theory. Identity theory is a little bit more complicated to relate to indirect realism, but you could say that in order to sense things you need your brain as well. If mental states are separate from brain states it may be difficult to connect sensing things with that point of view. If brain states are equal to mental states however, it becomes easy to see that the act of

sensing something relates to brain functioning as well. Looking back, my philosophy has remained consistent, and I believe I chose the two approaches to this problem that fit empiricism the best, as they are all about sensing to create identity. I believe that the memory theory and to an extent, identity theory are just natural progressions of empiricism.