

DISEMBODIED EXISTENCE AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

By

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Disembodied existence requires the survival of an individual's mental self after his physical death. The purpose of this paper is to establish the feasibility of disembodied existence and its compatibility with personal identity criteria normally described in terms of continuity of memory and character. To do so, we must first reject the claim made by Penelhum and others that memory presupposes bodily continuity¹. Furthermore, it is necessary to flesh out the conditions of causality and perception consistent with disembodied existence. A bodily criterion of personal identity may solve many ordinary questions of identity but not when identity framework is sufficiently broadened to include other logically possible, if technically impossible, cases, including cases of disembodied existence. The concomitant plausibility of disembodied existence and identity criteria based on continuity of memory and character is the subject of this thesis. The intertwining of these two concepts explains the nature of the self over time.

Disembodied existence is usually conceptualized in the form of a Quintonian "soul", a Cartesian "subject of thought", or a Platonic "spirit". Penelhum relates disembodied existence with issues of personal identity in the following way:

If the identity of a person is necessarily connected with the persistence of his body through time, then it is logically impossible for a person to survive the death of his body. If, on the other hand, there is no such necessary connection, it is at least logically possible that death is not the end of a person, but merely one major event in history.²

It is useful to think of a disembodied person as a mental self, a continuous subject of mental events and experiences. Life is a stream of consciousness, a series of continually evolving mental states, each of which, after coming into existence, is virtually impossible to replicate after being replaced by the next mental state. The mental self is best illustrated by the mental experiences produced by perception. At each moment, we are bombarded by differing combinations external sense data, even as we move our heads slightly and our visual fields shifts. Perception has a dynamic, flowing nature, as do the mental experiences

¹ Terrance Penelhum, Survival and Disembodied Existence (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), p. 66.

² Ibid., p. 14.

produced by perception. The mental self of a disembodied person can be described as his perpetual succession of mental states subject to causal laws connecting them over time so as to individuate two or more disembodied persons.

Although the mental self of the embodied person requires an intimately conjoined physical body, a person's mental experiences could continue without a body. This autonomy of mind is explained by the nature of mental states and the two component parts of conscious experience: Introspection, or self-reflection, and perception.

Introspection and perception blend together during normal consciousness to produce a phenomenal field which governs a person's actions. The two processes interact simultaneously producing what we experience during normal conscious activity. Perception operates through the five senses, producing the neuron firings which speed through the nervous system and result in conscious visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and taste experiences. If the perceptual component of the mind were to be temporarily rendered inoperative, introspective experiences constitute the entirety of the mental self.

The physiological construction of the sense organs and the connective nervous tissue and its termination in the brain (the center of embodied consciousness), enable our perceptual faculties to operate. Human perception requires subjects and objects extended in space in order to function. In addition, perception is an indispensable process through which an embodied person collects data essential to his physical survival. The five senses are analogous to any other organ of the body which necessary to survive and without which it is impossible to avoid physical death. The brain is essential to human bodily existence, and when destroyed, results in the end of one's physical existence and the beginning of disembodied existence.

Through perception we access our external world. In contrast, introspection, or self-reflection, is the mind's ability to scan its own being and produce a myriad of imagery. For instance, memory is an example of an introspective image, being a structural analogue of a past event produced in the form of a present mental experience. Introspection occurs both

voluntarily and involuntarily³. A voluntary desire to form a certain mental image causes the image to exist. Spontaneous conscious images also result from involuntary introspection. In a state of sensory deprivation, a person's experiential world consists entirely of his introspective mental stream. As one walks down the street, what he is introspecting at any moment, in addition to the data stream produced by his perceptions, is his mental life as he knows it. In addition to the say, 100 plus pounds of physical tissue making up his human *corpus*, that (the mental self) is what he *is*. An embodied person is nothing more.

Could this mental self persist when not intimately conjoined with human tissue? Perception and introspection are helpful in answering this question. Since a disembodied person does not possess the same physical instruments of perception necessary for embodied perception, disembodied perception would have to be of an entirely different nature. Although it is impossible to deny that disembodied persons are able to perceive in some way, there are logical difficulties with the notion of disembodied perception.

Literature concerning disembodied existence rarely draws a distinction between the case of a disembodied survivor who is non-extended, yet locatable in a spatial framework, and the case of a disembodied survivor not in space. Recognizing this distinction, all future references to "disembodied persons" are meant to refer to persons not in space since the intent of this paper is to analyze disembodied perception in a non-spatial framework.

Consider the difficulties associated with a person not in space in obtaining visual sense-data. Our embodied visual field is entirely dependent upon our spatial position in the center of our field of vision. This raises the question of how a visual field would appear to a disembodied observer. Presumably, it would have objects arranged in the same pattern in which they would be arranged for a normal observer viewing them from a particular position in space.⁴ However, even if a person not in space could mentally access to the external world without the normal physical senses, how could he be intelligibly said to perceive from

³ Ibid., p. 47.

a particular perspective in space? He would be incapable of establishing a particular locational perspective. As Penelhum notes in “Disembodied Existence and Perception”: “I can attach no sense to the notion of seeing from no point of view, or seeing non-perspectively”⁵. Our sense data require a spatial relationship between the physical instruments of bodily perception and the mental self. Such a relationship cannot exist for the disembodied person not in space, as both the necessary physical instruments don’t exist, nor does the necessary spatial relationship. In addition, the changing and shifting of a person’s phenomenal field is partly caused by the movement of particular body parts, such as eyes or head. Since deliberate movement requires a physical presence to move, a disembodied person lacks the dynamically changing perspective phenomenal field enjoyed by the embodied.

These problems do not necessarily rule out disembodied perception, but illustrate that a disembodied person would need to receive sense data in an entirely different way than an embodied person. The end of normal perceptual experience at an individual’s physical death may not cause the disembodied survivor insurmountable hardship, however. The spatial occurrences we access through normal perception should be of no consequence to the disembodied person; his experiential world is without events in space. Furthermore, the disembodied person does not require sense data, e.g., hearing or vision, to exist. In fact, he needs no material brain or other body part to survive. Spatiality of the self is irrelevant to the disembodied.

Lacking the physiological apparatus necessary for normal bodily perception or the need for sense data at all, the mental self of a disembodied person consists entirely of introspective experiences, the products of his own self-reflection. The world to the disembodied is therefore a series of conscious images, both voluntary and involuntary,

⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

analogous to perceptual experiences.⁶ The world of the disembodied survivor is not a perceptual one like ours, but rather an ongoing private introspective experience. Capable of producing a vast range of imagery, the disembodied survivor is able to project himself into any conceivable environment. This world of imagery could include for every type of idea, including those which the disembodied person earlier recognized as sensations (visual, tactile, etc.) while embodied. As Price observes, “The survivor could produce images of a non-existent environment, so he could have the imaginative illusion that he was in fact in space.”⁷ The introspective stream includes present mental events produced by voluntary and involuntary imagery and previous mental events accessed through memory, memories of previous conscious states while disembodied and memories of physical and mental events during earlier embodied existence.

Must disembodied memory be dependent upon physical existence to *some* degree? After all, some disembodied memories are mental images of events while embodied. An uninterrupted introspective stream flowing through both embodied and disembodied existence seems reasonable enough, but disembodied veridical memory images of earlier physical events seem problematic, being dependent upon normal perception while embodied and arguably creating a causal dependence of disembodied veridical memory claims upon prior embodied existence. It would follow that the disembodied self is not truly autonomous because disembodied veridical memory is causally dependent upon a prior physical presence.

In reply to this objection, the *nature* of the event stored in memory does not control the operation of memory. Whether or not the event remembered originated as non-physical introspection or as a physical event, e.g. perception, is immaterial to the stored memory. In either case, the memory process is the mind’s ability to introspectively scan previous temporal slices of its own being thereby voluntarily or involuntarily producing present mental images of past events. Whether the particular memory originated as a physical or

⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

⁷ Ibid.

non-physical event does not dictate one's ability to "call up" that memory at present. That being the case, a disembodied person is not limited to producing only those memory images which originated as perception or other physical events. It is entirely plausible that a person stricken by amnesia while disembodied and unable to recall any events while embodied could nevertheless have as his memory contents solely introspective images which originated during disembodied existence.

Death marks the transition from a person composed of a mental component and a physical component to a person existing solely as a mental self, a self not temporary like the body with which it was earlier conjoined. Since self-reflection is not dependent upon any physical or spatial criteria, the mental self is capable of enduring infinitely forward in time. Some might object that this dualist theory fails because memory beliefs would be impossible for a disembodied person lacking the physiological features necessary to retain past experiences as memories. It is a widely-held belief that memory functions by a process of electro-chemical reactions which arrange the neurons in the brain in a particular configuration, resulting in a memory trace.⁸ Over time, the memory trace decays such that memories become weaker and some fade entirely. If memory really works this way, arguably a disembodied person, lacking neurons and all else physical, could not access past experiences.

In reply, one may posit that memory cannot be a purely physiological process. Certain temporal slices of our mental lives remain accessible through memory for long periods of time, while other mental episodes are soon forgotten. Intuitively, it seems that when emotions, desires, attitudes, or perceptions reach a certain level of mental intensity toward a particular mental or physical experience, the mental experience becomes locked into memory. In this way, memory is inextricably part of the mental self, an aspect of

⁸ Ernest R. Hilgard, Richard C. Atkinson, and Rita L. Atkinson, An Introduction to Psychology (New York: Harcourt Brace, and Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), p. 234.

introspection. The level of mental interest which triggers a memory occurs on an introspective plane and seems to key to making an experience “memorable”.

In a disembodied person, access to previous mental and physical states cannot be obtained through any physiological apparatus. The prior memory trace in the brain of the embodied person is now, in the disembodied person, a system of causal laws enabling him to scan his mind and call up voluntary and involuntary memory experiences. In this causal theory of memory, the retention device is the position of the event stored in memory such that a certain present mental event produces a memory of a particular past event. The causal laws governing memory in each person connect the two temporally separated mental events.

An example of a this causal connection is that which causes me to have a memory image of a city I visited with a friend when I have the present introspective image of only the friend. The mental process which produces a subsequent memory of an event is initiated when a person first experiences a mental state of the requisite intensity and his causal laws between his past and future mental events are such that the present mental state in conjunction with these causal laws, results in a possible future memory of the event. Over time, the contents of potential memory experiences in a disembodied person grows, weblike, as the causal laws link increasing numbers of mental events. Quite possibly, as the causal laws of memory become sufficiently numerous and complex, a person’s ability to isolate and accurately recall a specific previous mental event diminishes, accounting for the limited scope of memories both while embodied and disembodied.

Memory, as an introspective aspect of the mental self, contrasts with the bodily dependent portion of consciousness, perception. Memory is a peculiar form of introspection. Whereas typical introspective imagery produces an infinite array of mental pictures (e.g., unicorns, dwarfs, etc.), memory images are bounded by the constraints of actual prior experience. The distinction between memory images and normal images becomes blurred at times, and this gray area is where the concepts of veridical and ostensible memories become significant.

Only memories which are accurate reconstructions of past events are veridical memories. Ostensible memories are pseudo-memories, e.g., “ I thought for sure that I did such-and-such ...,” when in fact no such thing occurred. Veridical memory is a mental image which accurately reconstructs a prior event regarding which the person remembering was so positioned that the event was *accessible* to his phenomenal field at that prior time. An example may clarify the concept of direct accessibility to the prior event. Suppose one were to say, “I remember the assassination of John F. Kennedy”. Unless the person was actually in Dallas viewing the President’s motorcade at the time of the shooting, his memory claim probably means something like, “I remember hearing about the assassination on the radio.” Veridicality requires a direct causal connection between the viewer and the motorcade, without which it is logically possible that by some great coincidence the viewer is hallucinating precisely the same content as the actual event. If so, the person’s “recollection” of the assassination does not constitute a veridical memory. Simply stated, veridical memory requires a prior introspective or perceptual experience in a person (with the necessary causal connection to the actual event) which is the subject of his memory belief. Seeing the President’s assassination is a perceptual experience which would cause a subsequent veridical memory. However, a person merely hearing about the assassination on the radio and forming a mental image of what he construed the street scene, the motorcade, and the rest of the situation to be, creates an ostensible memory belief but not a veridical memory belief.

An ostensible memory is like a product of imagination, except that it is really is an unjustified, incorrect version of an event the person believes to have happened as he remembers it, when in reality 1) the event did not occur; or, 2) occurred in a different manner than depicted by the ostensible belief; or, 3) the person was not in a position to have the event stored in memory since he lacked access to the event at the time he presumes it occurred. Ostensible memories are comprised of more or less actual knowledge gained through introspection, the same type of knowledge when complete constitutes a truly

veridical memory. Quite possibly, when complete, actual knowledge is inaccessible to a person, he substitutes ordinary imagination in his memory statements. Any degree of this substitution results in an ostensible memory belief.

In this causal system of memory, a disembodied person experiences images of three types: Imagery resulting from introspection of the current mental self, imagery caused by an introspective process accessing previous mental states of the self (veridical memory), and imagery of the type characterized by ostensible memory, i.e., a combination of the two previous types of imagery which produces what seems to be true memory, but is not. The key distinction here is that veridical memories are totally based upon actual prior events, ostensible memories are partially based upon on actual prior events, and pure imagery is not necessarily based on *any* prior event, i.e., it is only imagery and is not memory at all. In this way, memory is purely a non-physical process of mental causation, capable of continuing in the absence of a body.

Memory requires a causal connection between a prior personal experience and the later memory image of that experience. Questions concerning identity and continuity of the self cannot be answered by reference to any bodily explanations if the self survives as the continuing subject of introspective experience while disembodied. As Shoemaker describes the nature of the self as revealed by ordinary psychological self-reports and memory:

When one says that one remembers a past event, it is surely not the case that one has first established that one is the same as someone who witnessed the event and then concluded, from this fact and others, that one remembers the event. That one remembers a past event seems, from one's own point of view, a brute unanalyzable fact. Therefore, it is plausible to suppose that the notion of memory is logically prior to the notion of personal identity; and that the latter must be defined in terms of the former.⁹

⁹ Sydney Shoemaker, Self-knowledge and Self-Identity (Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972), p. 152.

If true, bodily criteria are not necessary to memory. Penelhum and others disagree, arguing that bodily continuity is logically prior to memory.¹⁰ We'll examine this disagreement after first exploring the role of memory in determining continuity of the self over time.

Shoemaker rightly observes that memory seems to be an indispensable element of what constitutes a unique person. Although issues of interpersonal identity at any *one* time are distinct from issues concerning the continuity of the self *over* time, there is no point in theorizing what it means for someone to change identity without considering what it means for one to have the same an identity over time, i.e., the subject of his own unique mental experiences.

The essential determinant of personal identity is the mind's ability to connect mental episodes separated in time. Even if two persons are exposed to identical perceptual stimuli during embodied existence, their conscious streams remain inherently unique and not identical. You would expect them to have very similar perceptions. However, the introspective components of their conscious streams might be nothing alike but are critical to their personal identities.

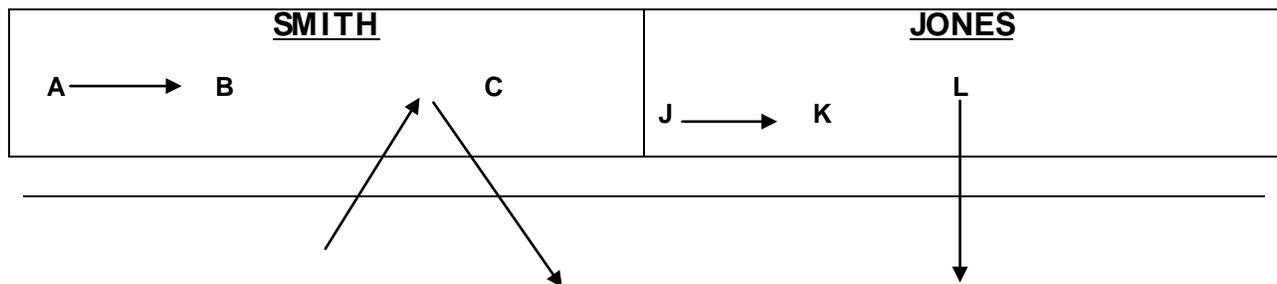
Unlike the perceptual stream, introspection survives physical death but does not, in and of itself define continuity of self. Introspection morphs, in perpetual flux. But the causal connections between temporally separate introspective states seem to be what individuates minds and establishes their continuity through time. We will now examine aspects of dualism which illustrate what is meant by the conditions of causality, these connectors, which pull together mental events over time to give us our the mental selves.

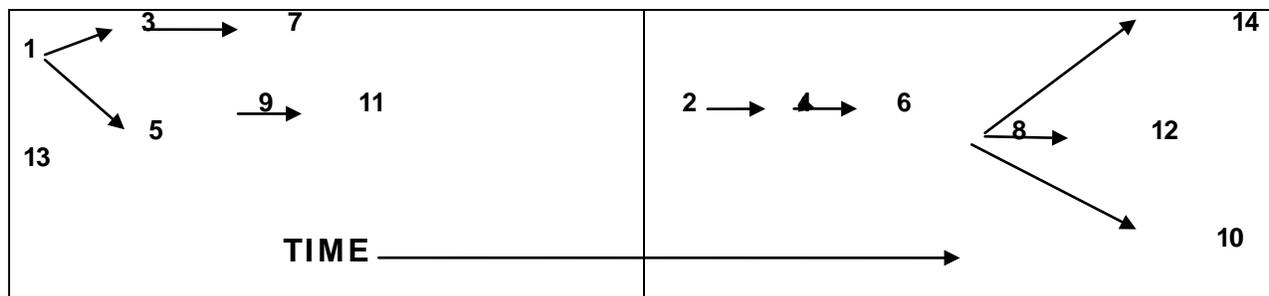
An interactionist, dualistic approach account is compatible with a system of causal relationships between the mind and body, such that mental events are capable of causing subsequent mental events, mental events can cause physical events, and physical events can

¹⁰ Penelhum, op. cit., p. 66

lead to mental events capable of causing other physical events. For instance, when I have the mental image of a place I traveled, it may produce a subsequent image of the person with whom I traveled. When I have the perceptual experience of seeing a clock, it may trigger an immediate mental event of remembering I am late for class. While it seems possible that two persons may have perceptions and introspections which are so strikingly similar that a “snapshot” of their mental lives would not individuate them, it seems impossible that their mental lives could proceed in even substantially identical courses for any significant period of time. A person’s future mental images is contingent on his present mental state in conjunction with his entirely unique memory content, i.e., mental history. Each percipient person has a distinct spatial location denoting the center of his phenomenal field which leads to almost infinite diversity of perceptual input among persons. No two of us can physically occupy the same spot. This fact alone leaves each person with a distinct mental history shaped by a unique spatial position and a correspondingly unique phenomenal field. Given the continual conscious interaction between perception and introspection, as time passes it would be more than a very great coincidence for two people to have exactly the same introspective experience constantly interacting with two entirely different perceptual experiences.

In the diagram below, the letters represent perceptions and the numbers represent individual introspective events. The causation arrows show the relations between perceptions and introspections, perceptions and future perceptions, and introspections and future introspections. The area above the heavy black line represents the perceptual streams of consciousness for Smith and Jones; the symbols below the line represent their introspective consciousness.





This diagram represents a minute temporal slice of a person's conscious stream. As time passes, the causation arrows continue to branch and grow more complex. Memory would be represented by very long arrows originating at either perceptions or introspections. Some introspective episodes would be caused by a combination of prior introspections and/or perceptions. Note that the mental life of a disembodied survivor would be represented only by the portion of a diagram *below* the black line, i.e., the introspective component.

The diagram illustrates that as a person's mental history becomes more complex over time, it becomes implausible for any two persons to have identical phenomenal fields (the same combination of letters and numbers located vertically over each other). Given this variability of individual consciousness, it is also implausible for two persons to have identical *conscious sequences* consisting of a memory belief, a prior personal experience, and the necessary causal connection between the two. By reference to these conscious sequences, we are able to individuate mental selves and identify a feasible criterion with which to establish the continuity of the self over time.

Each person develops different memory beliefs because he has experienced different perceptual and introspective mental images throughout his life. Each person's accumulated memory information also becomes less and less like another person's as time marches forward. With each person having highly unique memory contents which constantly interact with current mental states, the causal laws relating past and present mental events and producing future mental events vary widely from person to person. This reasoning explains

why the same external stimulus can produce strikingly different mental events in two persons.

Our thesis is that a person is a qualitatively distinct mental self, capable of interacting with a body, and also capable of existence independent of a body. Given that each person is nothing more than a qualitatively distinct stream of introspective consciousness, it follows from this definition that it is impossible for any two persons to be identical. As noted, the interpersonal variation of memory beliefs and prior personal experiences outlined above require a multitude of causal laws connecting every two temporally separated mental episodes. For instance, if a causal law causes the memory of event E_1 upon the current introspective event E_2 in person A, and person B had never experienced E_1 , the same causal law is not a factor in providing continuity of consciousness in person B, although it is in person A. These causal connections are critical to the continuity of the self over time.

While the contents of one's consciousness and one's memory contents each constantly change, the causal laws connecting memory and present consciousness are constant. When memories can no longer be summoned up, the causal link between present consciousness and memory has become inoperative. The integrity, or shearing, of these causal connections help us understand the critical role of memory in establishing continuity of the self.

In Penelhum's *Memory and Personal Identity*, he argues that while memory is a significant aspect of personal identity, a bodily criterion is the more fundamental personal identity determinant.¹¹ Since he contends that memory as a criterion of personal identity is dependent in critical ways upon the existence of a bodily criterion, he would reject our thesis that the causal connections between a person's temporally separated mental episodes do not require a physical presence. He would also presumably contend that since memory presupposes a physical presence to do the remembering, and since memory is essential in determining personal identity, it is impossible for a disembodied person to retain his personal

¹¹ Ibid.

identity following his physical death. Indeed, Penelhum states, “The enterprise of giving identity to a disembodied person is doomed to failure”.¹² Because Penelhum’s views concerning personal identity and the impossibility of the self surviving death directly conflict with our theory of mental self compatible with disembodied existence, we must now dissect the structural features of Penelhum’s position.

Penelhum offers two explanations for his belief that bodily identity is the more fundamental criterion of personal identity:

- 1) Since bodies are spatio-temporally continuous, it is always possible to try to determine who someone is by scrutinizing his physical characteristics, even though he cannot recall some critical deed or experience in his past.
- 2) When he does claim to remember his past, his claim can only be true if he was physically present at the episode he seems to recall.¹³

Penelhum’s first argument construes the self as a tangible, physical entity, distinguishable from all others by its particular configuration and spatial position. However, the notion that it is always possible to identify someone is by scrutinizing his physical characteristics does not seem to withstand scrutiny in all logically possible situations. Suppose that future medical technology allows the nurturing of genetically identical twins in a controlled environment such that at any stage of their development the twins are indistinguishable by any available physical comparisons. In this case, it is impossible to determine identity without more, access to the psychological attributes of each person. Penelhum might reply that the intimate conjunction of mind and body during physical existence serves as the fundamental criterion of identity in this way: If each of the twins were monitored or marked in such a way that it would be impossible to get the two

¹² Ibid., p. 67.

¹³ Penelhum, loc. cit.

confused, we can then verify the fact that yes, this is twin A because this is twin A's body and has always been in Ann Arbor whereas twin B's body has always been in Chicago. However, this spatio-temporal continuity test fails as the identity criterion in cases where "Smith" and "Smith's body" no longer denote the same entity. For example, suppose future medical technology enables physicians to remove Jones' healthy brain from his diseased body and transfer the brain to another body. To his surprise, Jones later discovers that he has the physical characteristics of a new body (including appearance, voice, etc.) but he still has the same memories, mental skills, and psychological attributes he always knew before the operation. Under Penelhum's spatio-temporal test of continuity, Jones' now deceased original body must still be Jones and Jones could no longer exist as a individuated self, a continuing subject of conscious experience. Intuitively, the memory claims and other psychological qualities which are inseparable aspects of the person known as Jones leads us to conclude that the person composed of Jones' brain and his new body is truly Jones, a conclusion is wholly compatible with our theory of the self, one which recognizes that the human tissue which forms the vessel of our embodied existence is no more than a temporary cloak and that the self is perfectly capable of surviving after shedding this cloak which it first drew around itself at birth. Penelhum might respond by modifying his bodily criteria so that the spatio-temporal continuity of the entire body is not the determinant of identity, but instead given this higher level of technology, the spatio-temporal continuity of the *brain* determines continuity of the self. By monitoring the location of a particular brain throughout its existence, even through successive brain transfers, the identity of one person could always be determined. The weakness of this approach is clear when we suppose that the transplant process is improved to produce functioning human brains from the lobes of other brains. In this case, how is it possible to assign an identity to the brain (and presumably to the body with which it is attached) based upon a bodily criterion? It is an open question as to whether the person who has been medically assembled would be the same as the person who donated one of the parts composing the new brain because of the role of the part, or

whether the person would be a mixture of the characteristics of the persons from which his brain physiology originated, or whether the person would be a new person entirely. Obviously, Penelhum oversimplifies the personal identity question by supposing that continuity of the self can *always* be determined by bodily criteria. While the wide variety of personal bodily characteristics has a degree of practical applicability in solving many ordinary questions of identity, its limitations appear when the identity framework is broadened to include logically possible, if yet medically impossible cases. Bodily criteria of personal identity are fraught with logical difficulties even before we ponder whether the criteria to makes any sense in cases of disembodied existence.

Penelhum fails to account for all cases of self-continuity because his approach is concerned only with the external, physical manifestation of the self. Since a person is distinct from the body with which he interacts during bodily existence and is capable of existing without it, a purely physical analysis of the self is an incomplete account of personal identity.

Penelhum's second basis for his belief that bodily identity is the more fundamental criterion of personal identity is as follows: When a person claims to remember his past, his claim can only be true if he was physically present at the episode he seems to recall.¹⁴ Since placing an episode in mental storage seems to require a physical event to activate the storage process, Penelhum supposes, memory must be contingent upon bodily continuity. He seeks to establish a memory criterion of identity and then to demonstrate its dependence upon a physical criterion of existence. Penelhum claims that it is impossible to apply the concept of personal identity over time to a disembodied person. Furthermore, he argues that there is difficulty in the notion of the ownership of experiences in a disembodied state since we normally identify the owner of experiences in an embodied state by references to his physical presence.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. , p. 71.

Penelhum's idea that memory claims can only be true if the person remembering was physically present at the event he seems to recall is only true of memory beliefs of an embodied person. In the case of a disembodied person, a person remembering an introspective episode which occurred during an earlier disembodied time does not require his physical presence at that prior time. Disembodied memory fits our earlier description of memory as being inadequately characterized as a purely physiological process. Memory is better understood as a mental process combining present mental states and causal relationships between temporally separated mental states so as to replicate previous mental states. Penelhum's entire concept of personal identity presupposes the impossibility of disembodied existence and is in that sense incomplete.

In order to respond to Penelhum's rejection of ownership of experiences in a disembodied state, we must distinguish between ownership of experiences and methods of identifying those experiences. Experiences are "owned" by an individual in the sense that only he possesses the singular high level of awareness of those experiences which gives him incorrigible knowledge of his own prior mental states. It is impossible for a person to access to the mental events of another person with the same clarity with which he accesses his own consciousness. Even though disembodied persons, by definition, cannot be individuated as a particular physical presence, it is nevertheless logically possible to identify persons based upon their individual conscious streams. Contrary to Penelhum's notion, a person is identified who as a particular physical substance has solely been individuated as a physical substance and not as the person himself. During embodied existence, it is convenient to identify a person by identifying the body with whom he is conjoined. Locke's classic case of two persons exchanging bodies, *The Prince and the Cobbler*, show that this assumed relationship is not always valid.¹⁶ Physical tests can provide supportive evidence of personal identity but are incapable of determining identity in all logically possible

¹⁶ John Perry, Personal Identity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 4.

situations. The fact that there are no existing physical tests of the disembodied does not mean that they cannot own their mental experiences. Penelhum may be correct in asserting that it is impossible to individuate the ownership of experiences in the next world by reference to various physical substances. This does not mean that the ownership does not exist or that it cannot be identified through other means.

The third weakness in Penelhum's concept that a memory criteria of identity presuppose physical existence is apparent when we examine the nature of first-person psychological statements. Shoemaker argues that the truth of first-person psychological statements are known in the absence of information concerning one's body.¹⁷ For instance, it is not necessary for me to be subject to a dental examination or a brain scan for me to conclude that I have a toothache; my awareness of my own toothache is logically prior to any physical examination. Unlike first-person statements which refer to a *body* such as, "I am over five feet tall," first-person psychological statements such as, "I have a toothache," refer to a *person*. "I am over five feet tall" is actually an a shorthand expression abbreviation for something like "My *body* is over five feet tall."¹⁸ Although a body "belongs to" the person with whom it is conjoined during our physical lives, a person is logically distinct from his body. Shoemaker admits that identity judgments of persons are normally based on similarity of bodily appearance and further concedes that "questions of personal identity are most definitely settled by reference to the psychological rather than the physical features of persons."¹⁹ He concludes that memory is a more fundamental criterion of identity than any physically verifiable fact. As he writes in his "Self-Knowledge and the Body":

"One's statements about one's own past, when made on the basis of memory, are not grounded on a physical (bodily) identity, or spatio-temporal continuity as a criterion of personal identity; they

¹⁷ Shoemaker, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

are not grounded on the knowledge of any physical relationship between one's present body and a past one. One could not discover the truth of any judgment of bodily identity, or apply any physical criterion of identity without already relying on one's memories.²⁰

Shoemaker seems on point. We do not verify our memory beliefs by comparing our present selves with our past selves using any physical evidence; nor do we conclude on the basis of any physical similarities between our two temporally separate bodies that "Yes, my memory belief is correct because evidence shows I was physically present at the episode I'm trying to recall!". Memories are veridical when they have the following content: A mental image consisting of an accurate reconstruction of a prior event at which the person remembering was in such a causal relation to the event being remembered that the event was accessible to his phenomenal field at that prior time. Nothing in the functioning of memory requires a physical presence, and there is no compelling truth in the claim that a memory can only be true if the person remembering was physically present at the episode he seems to recall.

Armstrong, in *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, objects to dualism in general. Since our theory of the self describes a mental self which is distinct from the physical body with which it interacts during embodied existence, his objection, if taken as true, would undermine the conclusions presented thus far. It is not my present purpose to defend dualism in particular, but rather to advance a theory of a memory criterion of personal identity compatible with disembodied existence. Accordingly, any general objections to dualism merit some discussion.

Armstrong raises the problem of the individuation of spiritual objects which exist at the same time.²¹ Certain aspects of this problem are similar to Penelhum's reasoning that bodily identity is the more fundamental criterion of personal identity: "Since bodies are

²⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

²¹ David M. Armstrong, A Materialist Theory of the Mind (New York: Humanities Press, 1968), p. 27.

spatio-temporally continuous, it is always possible to determine who someone is by scrutinizing his physical characteristics".²² Armstrong believes that two physical objects can be numerically differentiated because they exist in two different places. Conversely, if two objects are in exactly the same place at the same time, they are not two objects but only one.²³ In a spatial framework, difference of place individuates two physical objects.

Armstrong is correct in asserting that disembodied individuals cannot be individuated on the basis of their spatial positions. Although identification by means of spatial separation is common in our physical world, there is no such readily available means to differentiate two beings in a non-physical world. This does not mean that individuation of spiritual substances is not possible. As we shall see, the unavailability of spatial criteria to differentiate spiritual substances does not mean that spiritual substances do not exist. In any event, Armstrong makes a valid contribution to the doctrine of disembodied existence by recognizing of the fact that disembodied persons cannot be individuated on the basis of spatial considerations. Armstrong's objective is most lucid in the following form: Suppose the universe is symmetrical around a particular axis, such that for every substance on one side of the axis there exists an exact replica of the substance on the other side of the axis. This raises the possibility that there are two spiritual substances which are exactly the same in nature at a certain time.²⁴ In this scenario, two disembodied spirits cannot be individuated on the basis of their unique conscious streams, since in the symmetrical universe they would have identical conscious streams. The spirits could not be differentiated on the basis of their distinct mental histories, since each spirit would have exactly the same mental history. Of course, it is not possible to individuate disembodied persons on the basis of the bodies with which they interacted during embodied existence, since that those bodies may no longer exist. As Armstrong notes:

²² Penelhum, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

²³ Armstrong, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

And even if the spiritual substance or collection of spiritual items, were not disembodied, reference to the bodies would not really help. For might there not be just one spiritual substance or collection of spiritual items, identically related to the two bodies? How would the dualist differentiate between this case, and the case where two spiritual substances or collections of spiritual items, were identical in nature and each related to their own body.²⁵

In the case of disembodied persons, there is no principal of spatio-temporal continuity which could be used as a means to individuate one from the other. Armstrong concedes that he cannot rule out existence of a non-spatial principle of individuation, but the only principle of individuation with which we have any experience is that of being in different times and places.²⁶

Armstrong's position does not necessary imperil a dualistic account of personal identity. The fact that we have not yet agreed upon a principle of individuation does not mean that it does not exist. In fact, Armstrong acknowledges that the existence of a principle of individuation of a non-spatial nature is an intelligible conception.²⁷ Before addressing Armstrong's reasoning, it is helpful to first restate the non-spatial criteria of individuation in cases where the universe is not symmetrical and each person inhabits a position denoted by temporal and spatial coordinates unique from those of any other person. By first examining our reasoning in the ordinary case, tackling more puzzling case of the symmetrical universe becomes manageable. The following propositions explain the criteria upon which disembodied persons can be individuated, given the fact that each person could be described as inhabiting a uniquely distinct spatial position at any instant of his previous embodied existence:

- 1) Since each embodied person occupies in a unique spatial position unlike all others, it is impossible for a person to obtain the same perceptual data as another person.
- 2) This difference of perceptual data leads to a difference in the contents of each person's memory.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 28.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁷ Armstrong, loc. cit.

- 3) Statement 2 is reinforced by the fact that each person retains different perceptual data in memory and that the overall percentage of data retained in memory also differs interpersonally in accordance with the casual connections between temporally separate mental events in each person.
- 4) Since there exists a two-way interaction between perceptual experience and introspective experience, the unique spatial position of each person ultimately affects both components of the mental self.
- 5) Although perception through the five physical senses ceases at physical death, memory data remains distinct in each person after physical death.
- 6) Even partial or total memory failure in a disembodied person will not erase his previously established unique mental self. This is true because even after memory fails, a person's previously established causal laws of memory will be altered or erased unlike any other's.
- 7) On the basis of distinct conscious streams in each person (distinct present introspections and distinct memory beliefs), a disembodied person may be differentiated from all others without reference to spatial criteria.

Note that the above conditions hold true in any environment in which it is physically impossible for two persons to occupy the same space and therefore obtain identical perceptual data.

We must now address Armstrong's case of the symmetrical universe in which it *is* logically possible for two persons, even if through an enormous coincidence, have exactly identical components: introspection and perceptual experience. Armstrong writes that it is a meaningful possibility that two spiritual substances could exist like two perfectly synchronized clocks, each having exactly the same spiritual history.²⁸ This unlikely scenario presupposes exactly the same environment for each person, identical mental lives in every respect, and identical causal laws connecting temporally separate mental stages. Still, the highly implausible nature of this setting, in and of itself, does not lessen the force of this

²⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

objection. Yet the real question is whether his objection even applies to our previously described criteria of personal identity. We began our search for truth by recognizing that a mind, by nature and definition, is a totally unique spiritual substance, a singular entity. The real task is to develop a meaningful criterion of the continuity of the self through time. While Armstrong correctly observes that there exists no spatial criteria to which we can turn to settle questions of disembodied existence, his recognition that identical mental substances *can* exist, as we will see, only serves to subvert the identity question altogether and preclude any meaningful answer by not permitting the question.

If two, three, or more entities are identical, it is a fool's errand to differentiate objects which are, by definition, *undifferentiable*. Armstrong's objection transcends the logical framework of the question at issue. Armstrong anticipates a criterion of individuation for two or more objects which are qualitatively identical in every respect and therefore cannot be individuated. He merely begs the question. The following is the critical point which allows us to dismiss the possibility that two spiritual substances could exist as identical substances: Determining identity requires a *fundamental basis* on which such identity can logically be established. Where there is no such basis, there can be no determination of identity. There can be no determination of personal identity in a framework (like Armstrong's) in which *all* minds could conceivably be identical. Needless to say, this does little to advance the task of establishing a useful criterion of personal identity. If we continue to build upon our assumption that minds, by their nature and definition, are totally unique singular entities, we can dismiss the scenario depicting numerically distinct, yet identical spiritual substances as adding nothing to the discussion at hand.

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