
Technological fictions and personal identity: on Ricoeur, Schechtman and analytic thought experiments

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1. Introduction

It is notable when philosophers in one tradition take seriously the work in another and engage with it. This is certainly the case when Paul Ricoeur engages with the thought of Derek Parfit on personal identity. He sees it as worth engaging with, but as emblematic of errors in the analytic approach to the topic, especially when it comes to methodology. But he is, in a fairly clear way, taking the analytic debate on its own terms. Marya Schechtman's work is also noteworthy in this regard. Although she writes in the analytic tradition, in many ways she has represented thinking like Ricoeur's in the tradition – pressing concerns that echo his, and demanding that the debate needs to take notice. I will focus on complaints that both of them present, which I think are closely related, about the thought experiments that feature large in analytic discussions of personal identity, especially in the seminal work of Parfit. The complaints relate both to those devices and to the theory they have produced. I want to offer something of a defence of both.

2. The Psychological View of Personal Identity

Before considering their criticism, I want to outline briefly the Psychological Continuity Theory of personal identity (PCT) which Ricoeur and Schechtman consider, and how thought experiments are supposed to relate to it. The theory in general holds that person X at time t is identical to person Y at an earlier time t – n if and only if X is uniquely psychologically continuous with Y. Parfit describes the details as follows.

Psychological continuity is the holding of overlapping chains of strong connectedness ... For X and Y to be the same person, there must be over every day enough direct psychological connections. (Parfit 1984, 206)

The connections he has in mind are links of memory (or, rather, apparent memory), continuing dispositional attitudes like desires and beliefs, projects, emotional attachments, character dispositions and so on. Parfit does not mention unconscious connections, but those should be included among the links which make up the continuity. There need be no such direct links over a whole life, they may only be short-term, but it is the continuity that overlapping links provide that constitutes a person's persistence.

