

PARFIT AND WHITEHEAD ON PERSONAL IDENTITY

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It has often been mentioned that Whitehead's ontology of actual occasions excludes any notion of simple numerical identity of persons (and of any occasions) through time. This denial of numerical identity of persons through time follows from the core of Whitehead's metaphysics, which proposes: main mistake "that has thwarted European metaphysics from the time of the Greeks ...[was] to confuse societies with the completely real things which are actual occasions" (AI p. 204).

At the same time, whitehead's appeal to experience as well as commonsensical understanding of the necessity of "personal identity" requires that there be an explanation of plain fact, without which whole sets of notions of common sense lose their ground. Whitehead's philosophy of organism articulately is concerned with retaining or translating through his ontology the basic notions of realistic experience. "Personhood" and "personal identity" lay among those terms. Taking into account the denial of numerical identity, the question may be put as to what is to be retained from commonsensical understanding of the notion of personal identity. It is also worth to recall that for Whitehead the concept of "commonsensical" may not be understood as ahistorical apprehension of truth, to which philosophy must appropriate its conception of reality.

In this respect it will also be proper to take into account that in the 60s of XX century analytic philosophy so called "split brain" experiment introduced much of empirical as well as conceptual novelty into the discussions of the topic of personal identity. It provoked within empirical context perspectives not easily reconcilable to commonsense understanding of personal identity. Derek Parfit is one of the authors, who explicitly used this case for his arguments. The peculiarity of his position was the fact, that he applied that case for denying the possibility of positive solution of the problem of personal identity. At the same time, he tried to compensate the denial of the notion of personal identity with an attempt to broaden and retain the basic positive concepts traditionally based on that notion.

In 1989 George Lucas in his book “Rehabilitation of Whitehead” briefly and correctly noticed the similarities of Parfit’s reductionist notion of personal identity and Whitehead’s relevant conception. Since then, as far as I may judge, there was no attempt of comparative study of Parfit’s and Whitehead’s views on personal identity.

In this presentation an attempt will be made to elucidate some basic aspects of Whitehead’s and Parfit’s understanding of the problem. It will be maintained, that Whitehead’s view about personal identity is to be explicated in terms of “self-identification”, which does not presuppose identity of persons through time. It will be asserted, that the function of the notion of strict identity is substitutable by the notion of intensity of “connectedness”. That is the equivalent notion for Parfit’s “psychological connectedness” – the concept used by him for explanation of the possibility of concept of survival without identity presupposition.

That emphasis on the analogy of Parfit’s and Whitehead’s conceptions concerning personal identity is justified by presupposition, that Parfit’s main point, both in its positive as well as negative aspects, is well explicable in Whiteheadian organismic conception of relatedness of actual occasions.

In the first part of the paper Parfit’s view of the problem of personal identity and his main arguments will be exposed. The second part will concern Whitehead’s notions and their relation to Parfit’s.

I

1). **Split Brain argument.**

Split brain case, in some sense, may be considered as a specific conformation of Whitehead’s thesis about priority of complexity within any experience, including the experience of personal identity. Before sketching split brain case we may note that one of the main arguments based on it aims at showing that disjointed brain hemispheres of human body may “generate” relevant two independent streams of consciousness.

Split brain case may be described as follows. Bundle of fibers (corpus callosum), which connects two hemispheres of a brain of a patient is cut, which causes ceasing of

the communication between the two hemispheres. Between two eyes of the patient a sheet of paper is placed so that her left eye sees only one color (green) placed before the eye and her right eye sees only color red, not seen by the left one.

After she is asked how many colors was she seeing, her answer was: one. Next, she is asked to write down the name of the color, after which her left hand writes the term “green” and right hand writes “red”.

One of the closest explanations of this fact was the assertion, that each of the two hemispheres of the patient’s brain were separately controlling two sides of the body, and that this split control in each part of it contained complete structure of “consciousness” – two “ego” system with their intentional and representational structure.

Example for such split situation will be this: one color and a certain temperature felt in my left eye and left hand is unified and recognized as an object – ice, for example. But, I can not write down this information by right hand, though that hand is able to write all the information contained in a “right body” and in its ruling left hemisphere of the brain. I can not, as well, orally describe the bell, sound of which is heard by my left ear and an image of which is seen by my left eye, because the speech ability mostly is controlled by the left hemisphere of the brain, but that hemisphere does not contains the information (as far as the information from the “left body” goes to the right hemisphere). “Left body” has speech ability, but it has no information. So long as my “left body” is not receiving those data, I will not be able to speak about those events (although I can speak about many other things).

The Split Brain case presents interest from the perspective of synchronic as well as diachronic analyses. For Parfit’s discussion of the problem of personal identity it mostly concerns the diachronic analyses and plays negative role. It is designed to show the unjustifiability of continuity of consciousness as a criterion for personal identity.

Usually criterion of continuity is put forward, where numerical identity fails. In such cases an attempt is made on the ground of continuity criterion to retain the possibility of non-strict identity of persons through time. That is, granted that there is no numerical identity of successive stages of single personality, psychological continuity is supposed to be sufficient criterion for asserting non-strict identity.

Hume had already noted about theoretical flaw within the conception of continuity. As he notes with Berkleyan emphasis, “When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep, so long am I insensible of *myself*, and may truly be said not to exist.” (Hume, p. 239). He did not make much effort to explicate thoroughly his own remark concerning non-continuity. Hume, within the boundaries of his associationist theory, is concerned with the question of linear discontinuity, which is only one aspect of continuity criterion problem. And that aspect mostly relates the problem of possible “gap” between successive events.

Along the “gap” between linearly successive occasions, the another problematic dimension of continuity criterion of personal identity is explicated in “fusion” and “fission” thought experiments, which, on their side, depend on split brain argument. The theoretical possibility of fusion of different mental-bearing occasions, as well as fission of single one in many, is the nearest theoretical result of split brain case.

For Parfit split brain case introduces following situation. As Parfit argues, if psychological continuity were one-one relation, it would suffice for admitting it as a criterion for personal identity*. That is, if A is psychologically continues with B and there is no other person C, who is contemporary with A and is psychologically continues with B, then it is possible to assert identity between A and B. But, Split Brain case shows that split perceptual field functions as perfectly in half a body as it may in the whole. This example provides a ground to imagine a case, where disjoined hemispheres of one brain are transplanted into two separate bodies – a case, where the two persons are psychologically continues with the first, donator’s psyche.

And if there are two persons – that is, two simultaneously present bodies, each of which might coherently say “I see (think) that...” – then maintaining psychological continuity as a criterion for personal identity becomes irrelevant. It is impossible to maintain that two existing persons are one (without introducing something like Kantian or Fichtean transcendental ego governing multiplied bodies).

Parfit’s claim is this:

- a) As long as a person, who survives with one brain hemisphere, on a commonsensical ground is considered the “same” person, so must be done with

* Derek Parfit, Personal identity, *Philosophical Review*, Jan. 1971, p. 12,13;

- two transplants - persons, surviving with distributed hemispheres of initial person's brain;
- b) However, in this case, although continuity holds, the assertion of identity is impossible (two can not be one).
 - c) At the same time, denial of "survival" of initial B into two resulting persons A and C would involve the denial of legitimate case – A's survival with one nondamaged hemisphere.

Parfit's conclusion from this dilemma is the assertion, that diachronic identity of persons has no ground whatsoever.

Positive point in Parfit's discussion of the problem begins with the redefinition of some notions of ordinary experience. Despite the denial of continuity criterion, he claims that the basic and important notions of our practical experience, which usually are thought to presuppose personal identity, may be saved on another conceptual ground. According to him, such notions as memory, intention, survival and other dependent ones are translatable without identity presupposition.

Parfit's definition of q-memory (quasi-memory) is a basis for pointing to what he calls "psychological connectedness" among temporally successive person-stages as to the ground for retaining what has importance. Definition of q-memory is this: A has q-memories if a) A has beliefs, which in themselves appear as a memory beliefs b) there is B, who really had experience, relevant to those memory beliefs and c) A's memory beliefs are dependant upon B's initial experience in the same way as B's memories are*. Apart from the fact that this definition does not presuppose identity of a person through time, we should also note, that it does not (logically) presuppose difference either. Parfit's aim is to clear the way for "me identification" language, which *logically* will not be dependent on identity supposition whether positively, or negatively.

Possibility of having q-memories (q-intentions) without having ego-identity memories has to do with Parfit's bundle-theory approach to the conception of the self. On that ground he argues in opposition to Thomas Reid, that remembering experience does not presuppose remembering *me having* an experience. As he notes, "when I seem to

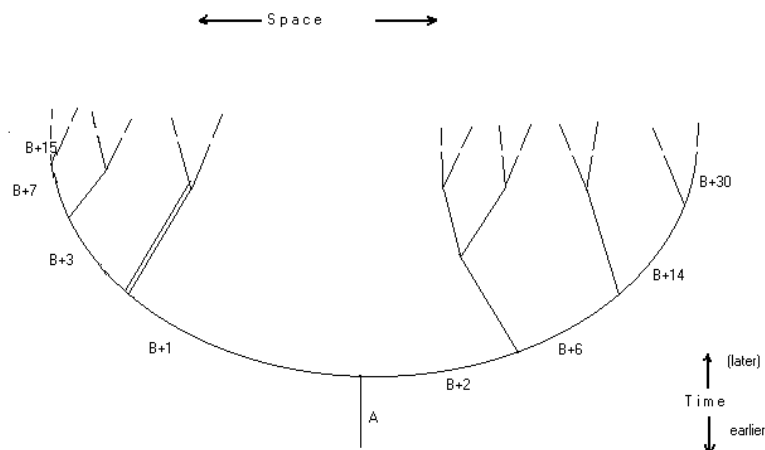
* *Ib.* p 15;

remember an experience, I do indeed seem to remember *having* it. But it can not be a part of what I seem to remember about this experience that I, the person who now seem to remember it, am the person who had this experience”^{**}.

So, having q-memories and other internal representations is sufficient to assert “psychological connectedness” among individuals. A and B are psychologically connected if one of them has q-memories, q-intentions, or other mental contents of the other’s psyche.

Principle aspect of the notion of psychological connectedness, which distinguishes it from identity, is that it has degrees – it is not all-or-nothing relation. Also, psychological connectedness, differing from psychological continuity, is not transitive relation. If A is psychologically connected with B and B is psychologically connected with C, it does not follow that A is (psychologically) connected with C.

One of Parfit’s graphic representations of branching continuities is this.



^{**} *Ib.* p. 15;

Each individual within the two main branches of the “tree” of A will be continuous with all previous ones in their successive line until A. But it is not necessary, that B+7, or B+15 would q-remember A’s, or B+1’s mental events. It is more likely that the more further the individual from her “past self”, the less psychological connectedness will be between them. But this is not necessary.

So, Parfit introduces the distinction between “past and future selves” on the one hand, and “ancestral and descendent selves” on the other. “Past (future) self” applies where there is psychological connectedness. In such a case each resulting person of a fission can refer to original person as its *own* past self. As Parfit writes,

*“since psychological connectedness is not transitive, and is a matter of degree, the relations “being past self of” and “being a future self of” should themselves be treated as relations of degree. We allow for this series of descriptions: “my most resent self”, “one of my earlier selves”, “one of my distant selves”, “hardly one of my past selves (I can only q-remember a few of his experiences)”, and, finally, “not in any way one of my past selves – just an ancestral self””**.

Hence, absence of psychological connectedness, though not of a psychological continuity, between individuals is reason for applying the term “ancestral (descendent) self”.

Now we can notice, that Parfit’s working paradigm is internal criterion perspective for personal identity. He concentrates on psychological criterion as opposed to body criterion. But at the same time, he is not denying legitimacy of pragmatics of “objective” criterion for “identifying” persons. That is why the logical independence of self-identification from identity supposition works both ways: for the first personal point of view it allows self-identification, which does not presuppose identity; From the third-personal view it leaves the space for pragmatics of bodily criterion.

Main point, which is to be remembered, is the claim, that despite the lack of criterion for personal identity, and actually, on the ground of that fact, psychological

* Ib. p. 22

connectedness as defined here is what matters and, in its first-personal dimension, has an ontological import for self-identification.

Instead of dealing with further aspects of Parfit's notion of personal identity, we will turn now from this schematic presentation of Parfit's point to Whitehead's relevant notions with an eye to considered view.

In Whitehead's notions we are going to deal with specific and narrow aspect of possibility and experiential context of self-identification of persons from the first-personal point of view. But, before dealing with that concrete point, a few general remarks will be relevant.

Although, mentality for Whitehead has special relevance in the context of the present topic, it should be noted, that full articulation of the question of personal identity within Whiteheadian conceptions would require discussion of both body and soul structure of relevant types of occasions.

For justification of this assertion, two main aspects might be pointed out here. First, for Whitehead actual entity's synchronic identity – attainment of their definiteness, or individuation – can not be divided on “essential features” and “accidental” ones. This essence-accident distinction of traditional substance ontology has meaning in Whitehead when translated and applied to societies. But it does not apply to the identity of an actual occasion: it can not be said, that we can change a feature of one single occasion and not change the (synchronic) identity of that occasion.

Of course, it is possible to further ask a question as to what is meant by changing actual occasion's feature. If it means “self-changing”, or self-specifying, or self-creating of an actual occasion during the phases of concrescence, then this has one meaning. But if “changing” here means altering the occasions definiteness, that is, altering the “satisfaction” of the occasion after it has happened, then this introduces another sense, in which, if it is maintained that it does not exclude “essence-accident” possible application, then it already presupposes the conception of diachronic identity solved positively. That is why disjoining “body” from “soul” as irrelevant for personal identity already presupposes the identity problem solved in some sense. This aspect follows as well from Whitehead's holistic ontology of occasions.

Another point to be mentioned is the fact, that for Whitehead the term “body” of a living actual occasion does not denote something, which ends on, or boundary of which are set through the “skin” of the occasion. That is, “Body” of an actual entity is what the world is for it from its own standpoint.

Taking those remarks into account, I would like to note, that here we are going to deal with the notion of personal identity through the first-personal point of view. That is the question: how, from the first personal point of view, can we legitimately identify, or recognize our future, or past selves? What are the grounds for and where is the limit to such identifications in the privacy of self-experience? Accordingly, the question about “objective” criterion for personal identity will be methodologically neglected and, by the same token, psychological field will be given priority.

II

The first step for finding positive directions to the question is to take into account Whitehead’s notion of inter-relatedness of occasions. Whitehead uses the rejection of Aristotelian view of “impenetrability” of substances – dictum, that the “first substance” is never attributable to another substance – to explain the basic epistemological and ontological problems of traditional substance metaphysics.

To look more closely to the relation of this point of Whitehead’s philosophy to the given problem, let us concentrate on some aspects of that conception of inter-relatedness of occasions. As Whitehead stress

“... According to this principle [of universal relativity] an actual entity is present in other actual entity. In fact, if we allow for degrees of relevance, and for negligible relevance, we must say that every actual entity is present in every other actual entity. The philosophy of organism is mainly devoted to the task of making clear the notion of “being present in another entity”.” (PR 50)

It is important to notice that the notion of “inter-penetration” as descriptive of an act of flowing in of occasions into other occasions primarily is relevant to the process of diachronic structure of occasions (societies, nexuses) and only after that to synchronic

structure of them. By this remark it is meant here that presence of an occasion in another occasion is explainable through a temporal aspect, which is called by Whitehead “transition”. The presence of one occasion into another one happens through the change of ontological status of the occasion. One actual occasion as yet actual can not be present in another actual occasion, when the last one is also actual.

This aspect is fixed in the principle claim of Whitehead that actual occasions do not prehend contemporary occasions (PR 123). This synchronic “windowlessness” of actual entities, in some form, preserves Aristotelian and Leibnizian intuition about impenetrability of substances.

It will be relevant to notice, that the experiencing by the self the relatedness to past selves has to do with memory, immediacy of feeling of immediate past and conceptual recognition only through mentioned general background.

In order to make clear what is the role of the temporal feature of the inter-penetration, a little glance at Whitehead’s notion of memory might be helpful. Let us recall Hume’s notion of it as a contrasting position. Hume, working on the ground of asubstantialistic “bundle theory” and a certain conception of time, arrived at an assertion, shared as well by Russell, that memory image must have some qualitative feature within itself to be distinguished from other mental representations. That feature for Hume was a degree of vividness, or faintness of an idea or impression.

When Whitehead notes that Hume’s appeal to vivacity criterion “...omits vital character of memory, namely, that it is a memory” (PR 135), he by the same token articulates decisive importance of the question of observability of repetition, or, more correctly, transition of past occasions into the present. Whitehead’s view, that repetition of images does not mean repetition of the same images to the same subject, follows from his already mentioned understanding of actual occasions. The one implication of that understanding is the fact that for Whitehead memory is a form of perception – mode of causal efficacy (PR 120,122).

To emphasize two main points concerning the notion of memory, we can say once more: temporal aspect, which belongs to the definitional features of the conception of a causal efficacy, is a possibility of direct intuition of the past (PR 167). The second aspect specifically emphasizes the first one. This is the fact, that the term “perception” in its

realistic use, in fact, is appropriate only for the mode of causal efficacy, but not for the mode of presentational immediacy. That is why Whitehead identifies the sheer form of presentational immediacy with the case of delusions (PR 122).

Apart from the fact that in Whitehead's conceptual framework memory does not mean "recollection" of the past in the sense in which the "subject" of the past and present experiences would be the same, the question remains as to how that non-identical with already past, objectified occasion "subject", for which Whitehead introduces the term "subject-superject", is related with its own memory-perceptions and other mental and physical constituencies. It will be relevant to terry on Whiteheadian conception of duration through which an act of memory-perception fulfills itself.

Microstructure of each act of experience is such that the influx of determinate past occasions (objectified many) into the becoming of an actual entity does not determine in principle the "subject's" identity. Avoiding the dilemma of sheer empiricism and apriorism, Whitehead introduces the concept of temporal priority within one single experience of an actual occasion in such a way as to understand "subject-object" structure of experience without apriority-aposteriority dilemma temporarily understood.

The essence of Whitehead's notion of structure of single experience of an actual entity, its concrescence, is based on the notion of epochality of time – the notion much discussed in Whiteheadian literature.

I suppose Whitehead's difficult theory of time is more conveniently explicable, at least for methodological reasons, in MacTaggart's distinction of A and B series of time. This, in a various contexts, were done by different authors (William Lane Craig, L. Ford). But the historical relevance of Whitehead's and McTaggart's differences in the basic point of the definition of time needs more emphasis.

McTaggart's view presupposes following distinctions. Past-present-future predicates of time, what MacTaggart calls A-series of time, differ from earlier-later relation, called B-series of time. The difference is that earlier-later relation between events does not change: if a is earlier than b , then this relation between them remains. A-series of time (past-present-future) involves change of those predicates by concrete things: something, which was future, will become present and necessarily will perish into the past. But B-series of time, if it is to be understood as a time and not as a "spatialized" scheme, always

presuppose A-series of time: if a is earlier than b , then in each case of that relation there are predicates of A-series of time, which apply to both a and b in such a way, that if a is present, then b is future and if b is present, then a is past.

The next and last step of MacTaggart's argument is not necessary here to state, but the dependence thesis – that B-series always presuppose A-series of time – is to be taken into account. Whitehead's theory of genetic succession in the process of becoming of an actual occasion presupposes earlier-later- relation, which, within itself, does not involve past-present-future relation. It is important to mention what is dependent upon uninstantienity of concrescence.

Often quoted passage from PR says:

“This generic passage from phase to phase is not in physical time: the exactly converse point of view expresses the relationship of concrescence to physical time. ...Physical time express some features of the growth, but not the growth of the features.”(PR 283)

“Some features of the growth”, which is expressed by physical time, belongs to the last stage of an occasion – to the “satisfaction”. After that point of attainment of definiteness, the occasion will be objectified into the concrescence of new emerging actual entity. One of the problematic aspects of Whitehead's ontology of actual entities was concerned with the question: what is the place and ontological status of satisfaction in the process of becoming? How is it possible to coherently attribute to it tensed predicates when describing the relation of satisfaction of an actual entity to the first phase of a consecutive actual entity? Is it meaningful to speak of earlier-later relation holding between the satisfaction of an actual entity and the first phase of a next one (and not of whole new entity)?

Many critical as well as interpretative attempts were concerned with mentioned aspect of genetic-morphological structure of process. When R. James claims, that the meaning of the terms “actual” and “entity” in Whitehead contradict each other (PS 1979 vol. 2, #2?), he means that the term “actual” refers to yet undetermined occasion, but that when it becomes determinate, when there is a determinate “whatness”, hence “entity”, it is already not actual. W. Christian's interpretation of indeterminacy of actual entities also concerns possibility of attributing to the concrescing occasion definiteness in such a way

that process of attainment not to be lost. He emphasizes the initial vagueness of subjective aim in the concrescence. As he notes, “The initial aim is vague in the sense that the relations of its datum to other possibilities and to physical data are not completely determinate. ...As the process [of concrescence] goes on the aim becomes more specific so that it is finally “this thing and no other”” (Christ p. 315). Importance of indeterminacy of actuality as actuality in Whitehead’s philosophy was R. Rorty’s main point in his article “Matter and Event”, where he stress the ontological role of “decision” substituting Aristotelian “definiteness” as a criterion of actuality (Rorty 83).

The status of satisfaction is important for making clear possibility and structure of self-identification of persons. On the ground of the mentioned reversion of traditional substance ontology Whitehead makes his point by noting, that for satisfaction Plato’s phrase “it never really is” is relevant (PR 84, 85).

Let us briefly consider Whitehead’s remark about the relation of satisfaction and consciousness. Whitehead claims: “no actual entity can be conscious of its own satisfaction; for such knowledge would be a component in the process, and would thereby alter the satisfaction.” (PR 85) What Whitehead’s remark implies here is, that reflection as awareness about determinate self may apply to past or to future “selves”, but not to the immediate present. It implies the conception, that in fact consciousness as an immediate awareness never reflects immediate present self as a definite identity. If consciousness as a reflective mirroring by the occasion of its own definiteness were allowed, then numerical alteration within concrescence would be inescapable.

Of course, consciousness for Whitehead is subjective form of certain types of occasions and, so, it is constituency of satisfaction of that type of occasions. But, to repeat, the consciousness never is consciousness *about* the actualized identity of “present” actual occasion. Consciousness is subjective form, for which a data reflected by it may be only past occasions. In this aspect, it parallels the mode of causal efficacy. That is why, as Whitehead puts it, “whenever there is consciousness there is some element of recollection” (PR 242). But as we fixed it earlier, “recollection” is a form of perception.

We can briefly summarize those points about consciousness by saying, that as far as object is prehended – in this case reflected by consciousness – that object must be

objectified past occasion, which, strictly speaking, can not be identified with prehending and concreting actual occasion.

If we try to connect these results with Parfit's claims, we can say, that as in Whitehead, Parfit excludes memory from candidacy for criterion for personal identity. However, both Whitehead and Parfit explicitly stress, that lack of identity criterion is not the reason for denying the function of the notion of self-identification understood as "self-projection, or, in more Whiteheadian terms, as "self-creation". Parfit claims that such notion as salvation may be retained by introducing notion of psychological connectedness, which is matter of degree. For Whitehead memory as perception is, in fact, quasi-memory, which plays decisive role for self-identification without asserting the diachronic identity. More concretely it is one of the decisive factors, which determines how in the act of self-projection an occasion achieves self-identification.

The points of those remarks here is that the criterion for personal identity (whatever it may be), when it is taken from the first personal point of view, strictly speaking, may apply to past or future projected (imagined) selves, but not to actually present self as to the only actual one.