

# Genetic Enhancement and Problems of Personal Identity

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## Abstract

There are various discussions on personal identity in philosophy. Some differences of opinions exist in western philosophy regarding the criteria that needs to be fulfilled for two different persons at two different times to be considered as identical. Some philosophers think if physical continuity exists between the persons before and after, then they are identical. Some philosophers go against this and think that only psychological continuity must exist between the persons before and after to be considered as identical. There are also some philosophers who think only if both physical and psychological continuity exist between two persons at two different times, then they can be considered identical. The answer to the question, which of the three criteria, i.e. physical, psychological or mixed, is acceptable as the criteria of personal identity - is entwined with a very important question: when an entity becomes a person. In this paper, personhood of an entity, whether a fetus and who are in vegetative state can be considered as a person etc will be discussed along with another issue on whether personal identity changes after genetic enhancement.

**Keywords:** Person, Personal Identity, Metaphysics, Epistemology, Criterion, Thought Experiment.

Before coming to the discussion on what we mean by having personhood, let us shed light on which criteria of personal identity is acceptable first. What criteria needs to be fulfilled for two different persons at two different times to be considered as identical, is a metaphysical question. The answer we get from this question can be classified into three such as physical continuity criterion, psychological continuity criterion and mixed criterion.

**Physical Continuity Criterion:** Whenever questions are being raised on which criteria needs to be fulfilled for two persons to be called the same at two different times, the supporters of physical continuity criterion say that if two persons at two different times have the bodily continuity, they can be considered the same. Here, by bodily continuity some meant the entire body and some meant only the brain. Bernard Williams, Judith Jarvis Thomson are supporters of this criteria of personal identity. Bernard Williams explained the limitations of psychological continuity criterion and discussed the necessity of physical continuity criterion through a thought experiment. He claims personal identity can not be determined without bodily continuity. If a person named Charles wakes up one day and claims he is Guy Fawkes, he has all the memories of Guy Fawkes, then the supporters of psychological continuity criterion will consider this man as Guy Fawkes, because of the memories. But if another person named Robert claims he is Guy Fawkes too because he also has the memories of Guy Fawkes. Now the question is, who is Guy

Fawkes ? Two persons can not be Guy Fawkes at the same time. This is why Bernard Williams explained the necessity of bodily continuity. He thinks whoever of these two has bodily continuity, is Guy Fawkes. Here, only psychological continuity is not enough to determine who Guy Fawkes is. Physical continuity is necessary. Thomson in “People and their bodies”, introduced four different situations to strengthen the necessity of bodily continuity over psychological continuity.

**Case 1:** Imagine the brain of a person named Brown is transplanted into another person named Robinson. Now the resulting person with Brown’s brain and Robinson’s body will identify himself as Brown because he has all the memories of Brown, and will believe the body as Robinson’s.

**Case 2:** During the same transplant let us use a medicine so that after transplanting Brown’s brain into Robinson’s body, the resulting person will also have Robinson’s memories. Now, he will identify himself as Robinson because of the memories. The basis of calling this resulting person as Brown will be the brain of Brown.

**Case 3:** If this time, only the memories of Brown are somehow injected into Robinson’s brain then the resulting person with Brown’s memories, Robinson’s brain and body will identify himself as Brown because of the memories.

**Case 4:** If only memories, desires, beliefs can be injected into someone else’s brain without transplanting the whole brain into the body, then these memories, desires, beliefs can be injected within not only one but two different persons. There are no limitations. If Robinson’s memories, desires, beliefs can be injected into Brown’s brain, it can also be injected into Dickenson’s brain. Now, these two resulting persons will identify themselves as Brown. Therefore, psychological continuity criterion is not sufficient to determine who Brown is. Thomson further said that a person can remain the same during a timeline if and only if there exists bodily continuity and consciousness.

**Psychological Continuity Criterion:** John Locke is a supporter of psychological continuity criteria. In the “Identity and Diversity” chapter of his book “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding”, he discussed this topic. In his opinion, human beings and persons are different so the criterion of being human and personal identity is different too. We can say two human beings at two different times are the same even if they have some psychological changes but have bodily continuity. But the criteria of having the same personal identity is self consciousness, feeling of agency, rationality. Without the continuous existence of these, no two different persons at two different times can be considered as the same. He believes continuity of memory is the primary condition of personal identity. If a person can not remember his or her past actions anymore, he or she can not be held responsible as the persons before and after are not the same. They can be the same human being but not the same person anymore. Locke suggests memory and psychological continuity is necessary and sufficient criterion of personal identity. Joseph Butler, Thomas Reid are also supporters of this view.

There are many issues regarding the physical and psychological continuity criteria, because the body suffers continuous changes throughout life. Despite these changes, considering the physical continuity criterion as the criterion of personal identity can not always determine the personal identity in some cases. If 50% of a person A’s brain is transplanted into a person B and the rest of the brain is transplanted into a person C, then what should we call the resulting person ? Can they be called B and C anymore ? Can we call both of them A now ? The supporters of bodily continuity criteria have no answer to this problem. Since B and C have A’s brain, they can not be B and C anymore. Again, since both of them have A’s brain, both of them can not be A at the same. Supporters of bodily continuity can not clarify continuity of

which part of the body is essential to determine personal identity.

Again, only psychological continuity can not determine whose claim is righteous when two different persons claim to have the same person's memories. Besides, if a person can not remember his or her past actions, psychological continuity criteria suggests that he or she is no longer responsible for the past actions since he or she has no memories of that - this is not common sense. Since the aforementioned two criteria have various problems, philosophers proposed another criterion - mixed criterion.

**Mixed Criterion:** The supporters of this criterion say that two persons at two different times can be considered as the same if there exists brain and psychological continuity. Now, since the brain is a physical part and psychological part has been added, so this is a mixed criterion. The brain is an important physical part and also substance of consciousness. But, it has been previously said that only brain continuity cannot be the criterion of personal identity. Richard Gale is a supporter of mixed criterion. He proposed more than 50% of the brain and psychological continuity as the criterion of personal identity. Since no two persons can have more than 50% of someone's brain at a time, the problems some thought experiments were facing earlier, will be solved now.

The supporters of mixed criterion will solve the confusion of who is Guy Fawkes, in the given thought experiment from the supporter of physical continuity criterion Bernard Williams, where two different persons were claiming to be Guy Fawkes, by simply suggesting the resulting person with more than 50% of the brain and psychological continuity will be Guy Fawkes.

This mixed criterion will also solve the problems Thomson raised through a thought experiment while criticizing psychological continuity criterion. Whoever between Robinson and Dickenson holds more than 50% of the brain of Brown and Brown's psychological continuity, will be Brown. Both Robinson and Dickenson cannot hold more than 50% of Brown's brain at the same time.

If more than 50% of the brain and psychology is the criteria of personal identity, then what is the criteria of having personhood? What is essential to differentiate between a person and a non-person? John Locke said while differentiating persons from non-persons-

“Person is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it: It being impossible for anyone to perceive, without perceiving, that he does perceive.” (Locke, 1979, p.439)

I think a person can be distinguished from a non-person with the help of rationality. Self consciousness, feeling of agency, rationality are criteria of having personhood. A fetus is not a person because of the absence of self consciousness, feeling of agency and rationality. Whenever these characteristics grow eventually a fetus becomes a person. Again those who are in vegetative state, are not persons anymore though we care for them.

Now when we consider 50% of the brain and psychology as the criteria of personal identity and self consciousness, feeling of agency and rationality as the criteria of having personhood, and also some genetic enhancement has been done on persons, questions arise whether those enhanced beings are the same persons as before. Let us first clarify what we actually mean by genetic enhancement. The way science is progressing, one day there may be some groundbreaking technology which will entirely enhance a species physically, mentally, and morally. The resulting person will be having more capability in terms of physical and psychological aspects as well as morally upgraded. Now, have there been any changes in their personhood? Also if anyone opts out of the process and willfully remains unenhanced, does his

moral value remain the same with an enhanced person? David DeGrazia differentiated between numerical and narrative identity to answer the first question. Whenever we discuss the persistence question of a person's identity, that is a question of numerical identity and whenever we discuss what we want to become or how we want to look at ourselves in the future - that is a question of narrative identity.

Genetic enhancement can bring changes to narrative identity but numerical identity remains the same. There are no differences in moral values between those who are wilfully unenhanced and the enhanced persons.

I think there will be no difference in moral values even if the enhanced beings are more capable physically and mentally. A skilled person and an unskilled person both physically and mentally hold no distinct moral values. They both are moral agents. Similarly, an enhanced entity and a non enhanced entity will not have differences in moral values despite their differences in intellects, logics, physical capabilities.

Peter Singer has established his view that all human beings cutting across race and gender have the same moral values in the first chapter of his "Animal Liberation". According to him,

"From the mere fact that a person is black or a woman we cannot infer anything about that person's intellectual or moral capacities. This, it may be said, is why racism and sexism are wrong. The white racist claims that whites are superior to blacks, but this is false; although there are differences among individuals, some blacks are superior to some whites in all of the capacities and abilities that could conceivably be relevant" (Singer, 2015, p.30)

Therefore, the moral value of two persons will not depend upon their caste, gender, abilities etc. Considering a person superior on the basis of race or gender is wrong. Similarly, classifying humans into superior inferior on the basis of intelligence is also wrong. Singer again said,

"The claim to equality does not depend on intelligence, moral capacity, physical strength, or similar matters of fact. Equality is a moral idea, not an assertion of fact. There is no logically compelling reason for assuming that a factual difference in ability between two people justifies any difference in the amount of consideration we give to their needs and interests." (Ibid, 33)

It is not personal identity, but narrative identity that changes after enhancement. A person can become an developed one after the change in narrative identity, but can not claim any moral superiority. I do not think we can ascribe someone different kind of moral value based on his or her unmatched mental or physical skills. Enhancement is an artificial process. If one goes through this process, one becomes enhanced. If one skips this artificial process but gains the enhancement through evolution and becomes a different species, only then the different moral value comes into the question. Humans were Homo sapiens, now they are Homo sapiens sapiens through evolution. In simpler ways, we, human beings, come from a non human species. Now our moral value and the moral value of that non human animal we were, are very different.

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