

Arts Faculty Summer Research Scholarship 2008/2009

Personal Identity, Sydney Shoemaker and the Possibility of Extended Selves

By Dylan Reynolds

Supervised by Dr. Richard Menary

*School of English Literatures, Philosophy and Languages
Faculty of Arts
University of Wollongong.*

Contents

*

Introduction	p.3
Background to Shoemaker's Thesis.....	p.4
The Shoemakian Version of the Circularity Objection.....	p.6
Shoemaker's Solution.....	p.7
Implications and Objections.....	p.9
A Way Towards the Extended Self?	p.12
Bibliography	p.14

Introduction

*

Questions relating to the problem of personal identity (PI) have been at the forefront of philosophical investigation almost since the commencement of the modern philosophical project. Questions such as “what is a self”, “what is it to be a self” and “what constitutes someone as being a self” have received much attention ever since Locke proposed that an individual’s ability to remember past events was all that was required for them to be recognized as the self same over time (Locke, 2008). More recently much discussion has been centered on the possibility that selves are constructed through a process of narration, whereby human beings create selves by tying the various aspects of their life together into an all encompassing notion called “a self” (Dennet, 1991, Velleman, 2006). What I wish to propose is that these two approaches can be linked together, along with recently articulated theories relating to the relationship between cognition and the environment to create a new approach to understanding the problems associated with personal identity.

In order to undertake the project proposed above it is first of all important that we come to a basic understanding of the problems associated with having an account of personal identity that lists memory as a criterion. What then is contained in this report is a preliminary overview of the possible relationship between memory and personal identity as discussed in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Specifically the report will focus on the implications of Sydney Shoemaker’s “*Quasi – Memory Criterion*” for personal identity, as outlined in his 1970 paper *Persons and the Pasts* (Shoemaker, 1970; pp.269-285). I believe that Shoemaker’s conclusions pose a series of intriguing problems for philosophers, the solutions to which may force us to reconsider what selves are, what part narrative has to play in the creation of selves and how the self is related to entities and phenomena that are external to the physical body. The main task of this report then is to identify why Shoemaker’s arguments present us with the dilemmas it does and to get a

Deleted: e

sense of the theoretical directions we may want to explore in order to gain a fuller understanding of the problem of personal identity.

Background to Shoemaker's Thesis

*

Questions regarding the extent to which memory is a factor in the establishment of personal identity and selfhood have always presented a tantalizing problem for philosophers. The reason for the belief that there must be a link between memory and PI is brought about by the seemingly self evident truth that memory gives an individual a special or privileged access to their own past which no other person can have. Sydney Shoemaker's paper *Persons and Their Past* sits towards the end of a long line of philosophical texts which tries to decipher how this privileged access acts to guarantee that a person remains the self same individual over time. Shoemaker's thesis revolves around an extremely detailed analysis and description of the privileged access that memory appears to allow, and whilst his conclusion is that memory is indeed central to the constitution of the self, his conclusion is a complicated account which can only be grasped if one has an understanding of the main problem the paper tries to negate. For this it is necessary to return to Locke's original description of the relationship between memory and selfhood and some of the criticisms that have been leveled at this picture.

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke proposes that a conscious awareness of ones past, the like of which is contained in an individuals memory, is the key to identifying an individual at two different moments as the self same. According to Locke the privileged access that memory grants to an individual is the only clearly recognizable phenomena, cognitive or otherwise, which can tie an individual into one self same substance over time. As Locke says:

... 'tis plain consciousness, as far as it ever can be extended, should it be into Ages, unites Existences, and Actions, very remote in time, into the same Person, as well as it does the Existence and Actions of the immediately

proceeding moment: So that whatever has the consciousness of present and past Actions, is the same Person to whom they belong (Locke, 2008; p.213).

Locke's notion that conscious awareness of one's past via memory is a sufficient criterion for personal identity has drastic ramifications. According to his model it could be possible for the *same* person to inhabit two separate bodies at different periods just so long as one of them had a memory, or in Locke's words, a conscious awareness of being that person. Indeed Locke's theory does nothing for us to doubt that two separate human organisms could be the self same even if they are totally removed from each other by infinite amounts of space and time. But whilst Locke's account can be criticized for leading to a *reductio ad absurdum*, the objection which is most relevant to this discussion is the allegation that the privileged access granted by memory *presupposes* the existence of a self, and thus memory alone could not be said to be the constituent factor in regards to personal identity.

The notion that Locke's memory test for PI already assumes the presence of a self was first proposed by Joseph Butler in his *Analogy of Religion*. Known simply as the *Circularity Objection* Butler's view can be summed in the following way:

...consciousness of personal identity presupposes, and therefore cannot constitute, personal identity, any more than knowledge, in any other case, can constitute truth, which it presupposes (Butler, no date; www.philosophy.ucf.edu/pi/butler.html)

What Butler's objection amounts to is this: take my own memory of the time when I was three years old and drank dishwashing liquid in George Town, Tasmania. According to Locke this memory is sufficient to identify the person who is sitting here writing and watching *House* reruns as the self same individual as that stupid three year old. But reflect for a moment on what was just said: the memory of me drinking the liquid was identified as *mine*. The mere fact that I have cited the memory as *my* own demonstrates that it is already presumed that someone, or more appropriately, *some self* has the memory. As such if we use Locke's memory test alone as a criterion for

personal identity we end up trapped in a circularity whereby we already presume the very phenomena we look to explain.

The Shoemakian Version of the Circularity Objection

*

So far in this report I have only outlined the problem of memory in regard to personal identity in simple terms. What I want to do now is provide a description of the same problem but in the discursive form that Shoemaker uses in his paper *Persons and Their Pasts*. Whilst this process may seem repetitive, it will make our task of reviewing Shoemaker's solution to the *Circularity Objection* much easier. As such I will start with Shoemaker's description of the privileged access memory grants to an individual's past history.

According to Shoemaker memory claims have two universal characteristics which link their owner back to the remembered event. The first is what Shoemaker calls the *Previous Awareness Condition*, which states that if an individual says that they remember event X, they must have, in some way or another, directly experienced or had knowledge of X when it occurred. It may be of course that they could be mistaken and did not in fact witness the remembered event, but providing that their memory is veridical, such as mine of drinking dishwashing detergent then there can be no doubt that they did experience the event in question.

Deleted: d

The second characteristic of memory claims Shoemaker outlines is their *immunity from error through misidentification in regard to the first person*. While this claim might seem quite complex it actually describes the basic observation that if an individual claims to remember something, there can be no doubt that they are the one who have the memory. Take for example the statement "I remember watching *House* on Wednesday". Now when considering this memory I may well be mistaken in a number of ways in regard to what I remember; I might have gotten the day wrong, or maybe have incorrectly remembered what I was watching. However regardless of whether

the content of the memory is veridical or not, I cannot be mistaken about the fact that it is / who has a memory. As such my memory claim is immune from error in this sense.

These two features are the salient characteristics of what Shoemaker dubs *strong remembering* (or remembers-s). What is interesting about *strong remembering* is that it offers us a slightly more detailed understanding of why Locke's memory test results in the circularity observed by Butler. Both the *previous awareness condition* and the *immunity from error through misidentification of the first person* can only be present as features of memory so long as a self is in existence. As such Locke's memory test produces a circularity because it is based on the notion of *strong memory*. This then is Shoemaker's explanation for why Locke's original account cannot provide a sufficient constitutional criterion for personal identity.

Shoemaker's Solution

*

What Shoemaker's analysis so far reveals is that memory in the strong sense is too interconnected with the notion of selfhood to be of any constitutional value in terms of personal identity. As such Shoemaker suggests that if we can theoretically strip memory of this reliance on a specific self then we would avoid the inherently circular relationship between memory and personal identity. If this can be achieved then there is the possibility that we could get away with using this weaker version of memory as the sole criterion for personal identity. In order to do this Shoemaker tries to make a distinction between two different types of memory which is crucial not only for his own argument, but also for the type of argument I shall try to articulate later in my honours thesis.

Shoemaker asks us to imagine a kind of memory knowledge which is identical to strong memory in every respect except for the fact that the

previous awareness condition has been downgraded to the point that it can only be said that the memory in question is *someone or others* memory. For example if I had such a memory of sitting here writing this paper I could not make any claim stronger than “someone or other remembers sitting in room 19.1082 writing this paper”. This type of memory, which Shoemaker terms *Quasi-Memory*, would seem to be void of any reference to a specific self. The reason why this is so is because by weakening the previous awareness condition Shoemaker strips memory of its ability to be immune from error through misidentification in relation to the first person. Because of the fact that the memory can only belong to someone or other it cannot be said with certainty that the person who has the quasi-memory was aware of the event contained in the quasi-memory at the time of its occurrence, and thus we may well be mistaken in saying that the holder of the quasi-memory is the person who had the original quasi-memory in the first instance.

If we reflect for a moment it would seem that both strong and weak forms of memory cannot support a criterion for personal identity. Shoemaker's description of the weak form of memory makes it appear that there is no way of being able to trace the origins of a particular memory, or who actually did have the memory. Shoemaker points out that one of the most important features of strong memories is that there is an appropriate causal relationship between the event and the memories connected with it. This means that strong memories, assuming they are veridical, provide some spacio-temporal information which allows us to reliably trace the remembered event back to when and where it happened. But with quasi or weak memories this is not the case, because even if the memory is veridical, its status of belonging to someone or other means that it could indeed have come from anywhere, even from a theoretical duplicate universe as Shoemaker suggests (Shoemaker, 1970; p.275). As such we could not possibly hope to reliably trace a weak memory back to its spacio-temporal origins in the same way as we could a strong memory.

At this point Shoemaker retreats and asks us to consider what it would mean for us to incorporate the prerequisite of an appropriate causal

relationship into the description of weak / quasi memory. According to Shoemaker, this refinement would allow us to construct a picture that would allow us to understand that:

...the spatiotemporal relationship between the quasi-remembered event and the making of the quasi-memory claim is such that it is possible for them to be linked by a spacio-temporally continuous casual chain, and if we could trace the causal ancestry of the quasi-memory we could determine precisely when and where the quasi-remembered event occurred (Shoemaker, 1970; p.277).

To make Shoemaker's position clearer consider this example: A did Z but cannot remember doing Z. But B quasi / weak remembers, or has someone's memory of A doing Z. Now although we cannot know who had the q-memory of A doing Z, so long as it is in appropriate causal relationship to the q-remembered event, it can causally link A with doing action Z. As such the q-memory is sufficient to say A did Z.

What this means is that if we describe weak memories in the terms set out in Shoemaker's paper we can theoretically use them to link people with specific events at specific times. Under this description it is also important to note in order to be a strong memory it is a necessary condition that it also count as being a weak memory and therefore it seems logical to suggest that all we need are weak memories to link ourselves back to events in our past. If this is indeed the case then it would seem that we can indeed conduct Locke's memory test for personal identity, but only if we use weak memories which of course do not presuppose the existence of a specific self. If we do this then, Shoemaker reasons, we can avoid the Circularity Objection (Shoemaker, 1970; p.281).

Implications and Objections

*

Now that we have an understanding of Shoemaker's argument I want to focus on an element of his paper which I believe raises s interesting problems

concerning how the cognitive phenomena of memory relates to the constitution of personal identity. If we concentrate specifically on the notion that quasi or weak memory claims are sufficient phenomena for use in Locke's memory test then it opens up a Pandora's Box in regard to questioning the possible relationship between selves, memory and the environment.

A major quandary which Shoemaker's paper forces us to consider is the possibility of a self which is not necessarily body bound. By suggesting that *someone or others memory claim* is a reliable criterion for establishing a self then this is surely the same as saying that it is not necessarily the case that the individual whose self is constituted by the memory is the holder of the memory claim. If so then this would mean that an individual's selfhood is bound up in phenomena separate from their bodies. In other words Shoemaker's conclusions hint at the possibility that the self is at least in part constituted externally, and thus we may be forced to engage in a discussion about the possibility of an *extended self*, the kind of which has been hinted at by such as philosophers Clark and Chalmers (Clark & Chalmers, 1998; p.650). But before we can consider whether this could indeed be the case, we need to see whether or not Shoemaker's distinction between strong and weak memory can get around a specific objection relating to the relationship between memory types.

Deleted: s

One possible argument detractors of Shoemaker's solution may seize upon is that his separation of strong and weak memory is exactly the same as the distinction between intrinsic and derived memories. If this is so then Shoemaker's argument that weak memories alone can constitute selfhood is flawed. In order to see how this particular objection claims to undermine Shoemaker's thesis I shall provide a brief outline of Searle's original theory of intrinsic and derived intentionality.

The aim of the intrinsic, derived distinction is to explain how physical phenomena appear to possess a kind of intentional directedness towards a particular thing or state of affairs. According to Searle thoughts such as beliefs

and desires possess an original or intrinsic intentionality, which is to say that they naturally contain intentionality (Searle, 1983; p27). Take for example my belief that *the cat is on the mat*, now this belief seems to naturally be directed towards a state of affairs where there is a cat on a mat. But now say I physically manifest my belief by saying or writing down "*The cat is on the mat*". Now when I do this it seems clear that the action results in physical phenomena containing some form of intentionality. But how this happens is puzzling when in reality all I have appeared to do is produce some sound waves or written syntax on a page.

Searle's solution is to say that the physical phenomena *derive* their intentionality from the original intentionality contained in the thought (Searle, 1983; p.27). In essence the original intentionality is imposed upon a physical entity so as it reflects the original thought. What this means is that derived intentionality cannot exist without original intentionality, because for Searle the syntax of "the cat is on the mat" can only *mean* "*the cat is on the mat*" if there is an original thought to impose it's intentionality on the syntax.

Now if one applies this argument to the case of memory it seems to result in a similar conclusion. Take for example the case of an Alzheimer's patient who writes things down in a notebook so as they remember them¹. Now I take it that most of us would not want to say that the notebook *alone* would constitute that persons memory. But why would we want to make this claim? Well one possible argument is that the notebook is only an example of a *derived memory*, and cannot constitute a form of memory *on its own* because it has no original or intrinsic memory from which it is descended.

The question here then is whether Shoemaker's strong and weak memories are the same as intrinsic and derived memories. Shoemaker's entire thesis hinges on the proposition that weak memories are proper memories which are not derived from strong memories and thus not dependant upon them for their existence. If this is not the case then his

¹ See Clarke and Chalmers, 1998; pp. 643-651.

argument cannot work because weak memories could not be considered as memories without being connected to the kind of memory which, as we have already seen, presupposes personal identity.

Whilst I believe that this question requires further investigation at first glance it seems to me that weak memories are not derived memories at all. The reason for this is the initial view is centered on the notion of dependence. As I have already made clear derived memories are totally dependant on original or intrinsic memories for their existence. Yet this *direction of dependence* is not a feature of the relationship between weak and strong memories. I use the phrase “direction of dependence” with some emphasis here because while I believe that a dependence exists between these two types of memory I believe it is the opposite to that shared between intrinsic and derived memory. As was mentioned earlier in order to qualify as a strong memory, that memory must first of all fit the criterion of a weak memory. As such it would seem bizarre to suggest that a weak memory requires the existence of a strong memory and indeed one may be tempted to regard the opposite as true. As such it seems to me that weak memories do not depend on strong memories and thus we cannot consider them as being subject to the intrinsic, derived objection.

A Way Towards the Extended Self?

*

So where does this all leave us? Well it perhaps poses more questions than answers. What we appear to have is the suggestion that personal identity can be constituted by memory, but not necessarily by memories that belong to the individual whose selfhood is in question. If this is the case then we have to consider the possibility of selves which extend out into the environment, beyond the confines of the body. What type of selves are these and how do these supposed weak memories constitute them? What does this mean for the relationship between weak memory and narrative, and perhaps

most interestingly, can we conceive of selves, not as private individuals, but as intersubjectively constructed agents, dependant on a host of external factors which when combined help constitute our sameness over time? These questions will be the focus of my honours thesis, but it is clear that the implications are vast.

Bibliography

Butler, J. (no date). *The Analogy of Religion. Appendix I: Of Personal Identity*. Accessed 10/9/2007 at www.philosophy.ucf.edu/pi/butler.html

Clark, A & Chalmers, D. J, 1998, 'The Extended Mind', in D. J. Chalmers (ed.), *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, Oxford University Press; New York, Oxford, pp.643-651.

| Dennett, D, 1991. *Consciousness Explained*. Allen Lane: London

Locke, J. 2008. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford University Press: New York

Searle, J, R. 1983. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge University Press: New York, Cambridge

Shoemaker, S. 1970. "Persons and their Pasts", *American Philosophical Quarterly*. vol. 7, no. 4, pp.269 – 285

Velleman, J. D, 2006. *Self to Self: Selected Essays*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, New York.