

Skilled Disconnections

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According to Parfit, “Psychological continuity is the holding of overlapping chains of *strong* [psychological] connectedness,” (his emphasis) and “psychological connectedness is the holding of particular direct psychological connections.”¹ There is a direct psychological connection between A and B if B possesses memories of an experience that happened to A sometime in the past.¹ Admittedly, I may not remember anything that happened 20 years ago, nevertheless, I probably remember some experiences I had yesterday. Yesterday, I probably remembered some experiences I had the day before. The day before, I probably remembered some experiences I had the day before that. B is said to be *psychologically continuous* with A if there are such overlapping chains of connectedness between A and B. Underwritten by various thought experiments, Parfit concludes that when conversation takes identity as its subject, it is about this relation of psychological continuity that persons primarily care. I contend that when such conversations arise there is a very important feature of persons that the relation of psychological continuity fails to capture. Moreover, this feature is specifically constituted such that there is no such continuity. Nevertheless, these facts are very important to persons’ conceptions of themselves.

¹ Memory is not necessarily the only type of mental event that can instantiate direct psychological connections. If B has a desire, belief, intention, etc., that A had some time ago, there is yet another direct psychological connection between A and B. While Parfit acknowledges that psychological continuity should be understood to include these other states, his exposition focuses primarily upon the continuity of memory. Accordingly, I take it as appropriate to couch my exposition in similar terms.

A very important feature of persons' self-conceptions is that they are agents.² Great deals of the actions an agent may take involve a certain level of proficiency in a variety of capacities. A remarkable quality of such proficiency however, is that persons seem to possess very little, if any, conscious experiences of these abilities. Various actions that persons engage in can be attributable as skills. The ability to read is a skill, as is walking, riding a bicycle and driving a car. Most people can remember learning how to drive. Via 'overlapping chains' of psychological connectedness, even those that do not precisely remember the event itself are psychologically continuous with the person that once suffered such an experience. I myself do remember grinding my first clutch, whilst simultaneously discovering how staggeringly important depth perception is, as I slowly became skilled at manipulating the steering wheel of a two thousand pound machine. Oddly, though, I do not actually remember how I drove to work this morning. I remember *that* I drove to work this morning, but I have little, if any, memories of *how* I did it. Indeed, this fact seems strange until one reflects upon what is involved in attributing to a person a high level of competency in any particular skill.

At a certain level of competency, some actions seem to take on an intuitive or 'second' nature. This seems to imply that when a person engages in such a procedure, they are not consciously aware of most, if any, of the particular steps they are taking to affect the action. Without such awareness, it appears difficult to recognize any kind of psychological continuity with the person who drove to work this morning. Still, given that I did in fact drive to work this morning, I must have known how to operate the vehicle. This manner of describing the successful operation of a motor vehicle lends itself to a kind of confusion. It is not that I

² Within the scope of this essay, the concept of agency simply expresses the view that persons who take actions are to be considered agents.

consciously experience how to operate a motor vehicle; so much as, it is that I possess the skill of driving. The central difference between these two ways of describing this ability is that the former expression seems to stipulate a kind of awareness that the later does not, a kind of awareness that competent drivers do not seem to have.

Again, while I indeed hold 'overlapping chains' of psychological connectedness to the experience of learning to read, once the skill of reading was acquired, I ceased to experience *how* it was that I performed it. Given that I am reading at this very moment, I do in fact possess that skill. Nonetheless, I have no conscious awareness of how I am doing it. I may in fact reflectively conceive that I must be doing the same things that I remember doing when I was first learning how to read. The difference again however is that when I was learning how to read I had the conscious experience of stringing letters together, sounding out the pronunciation of words, etc. Once I had mastered the skill, I ceased to be conscious of such processes. I no longer experience *how* I read, rather, I just read. While engaged in the process of writing, I am no longer consciously aware of *how* I use a pencil. As long as a person does consciously experience the *how* of reading and writing, he or she has not mastered them. A proficient typist does not think of what his or her fingers are doing, he or she simply types. Such conscious disconnection is then part of what constitutes a high level of proficiency in such abilities as reading, writing, typing, driving; perhaps even such a skill as walking. It is conceivable that at one time I consciously experienced the *how* of walking such that certain psychological connections figure in a continuity of overlapping chains of connectedness. Despite this possibility, once I indeed learned to walk I ceased having such experiences. I am

no longer consciously aware of walking in so far as when I engage in the practice I do not consciously experience the myriad actions it takes to be successful.

The above considerations are intended to show that a crucial feature of what it is to master a skill is the apparent absence of conscious experience of the action while it is being performed. Assuming such experiences are missing from skilled actions, as far as persons exercise such skills, the relation of psychological continuity appears difficult to recognize. It seems that persons are in fact, consciously disconnected from a very large percentage of the actions they take as agents. This is not to say that the relation of psychological continuity does not hold between persons, but merely that such a relation does not appear to capture a particularly important feature about them, namely that they are agents who possess high levels of competency in an abundance of skills. Numerous types of resistance to this critique are of course available to Parfit. The remainder of this essay will remark on what a few of them might be and briefly point out how such rejoinders are unsatisfying.

One such avenue of resistance would be to point out that memories are merely one of the many kinds of psychological states in which a person can realize connections; thereby allowing the subsequent continuity such connections can afford. Indeed, Parfit briefly mentions this fact with regard to these very connections. As mentioned above however, the skillful undertakings of the kind of actions I have been describing are specifically established by a deficiency in the conscious experience of how they are being accomplished. It is not simply that I do not remember having taken action. As I am presently typing this paper, I have no conscious experience of believing in the existence of a specific pattern of keys, neither am I experiencing a particular desire or intention to move one finger before, after, or instead, of

another. Certain beliefs, desires, and intentions may have played a role in bringing me to engage this ability. No such experiences however, accompany the competent performance of the skill itself. In fact, the level at which I consciously experience what it is that I am doing seems inversely proportional to my level of competent performance. The more I think about it, the more typos I make.

Parfit may suggest that my criticism rests on a view that the relation of psychological continuity is such that it cannot be understood as intermittent. This would indeed be a strange position, given that so many people are familiar with dreamless sleeps and the like. This is not however the point I am trying to make. Parfit could indeed (in fact I think his position stipulates that he must) maintain that the relation of psychological continuity holds as far as we are connected to the psychological states that accompanied the learning of such skills in the first place. We are then connected to our skilled abilities as far as we were connected to the process of learning them. This is rather unsatisfying. Regardless of such connections, Parfit's position implies that we are not concerned with the actual skills themselves. Competent agents are primarily concerned with skill. Training does not constitute competent action rather; it is actual skill that constitutes the ability to engage in such action. As there are no conscious connections to such abilities, the relation of psychological continuity cannot capture them.

This suggests the last potential response to which I will respond, namely that psychological continuity does not have to be a function of conscious experience. In so far as I act successfully, a great deal of psychological states would have to be present at at least some kind of level; although not necessarily at a level of conscious awareness. This response seems

to me to be question begging. It amounts to the supposition that the only way to make sense out of a great many actions is by modeling the possibility of actions after a conception that necessarily stipulates the existence of the aforementioned psychological states. Perhaps such supposed psychological states are just pseudo-states fashioned out of some reflective attempt to make a certain kind of conceptual sense out of the fact that I indeed performed the action. Persons seem to convincingly contrive pseudo-memories, why is this not equally conceivable for the rest of the states in question? There seems to be a far more important reason however, to avoid describing the possibility of psychological states in this way. Parfit's position would then amount to the view that what people really care about in the discussion of identity is a relation that is never consciously experienced in a staggeringly immense percentage of cases. This amounts to the view that persons are ultimately concerned with the continuity of psychological connections of which they are never aware. Again, this is not a criticism of the intermittent quality of psychological continuity. It rather calls attention to the fact that to be concerned is to be consciously aware of certain psychological states. To propose then that persons who are agents are ultimately concerned with a relation that attains regardless of such awareness is incoherent at worst and bizarre at best.

¹ Parfit, Derek. Reasons and Persons. Oxford: Oxford, 1984. pg. 206