Empathic Access: The Missing Ingredient in Personal Identity

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1. Although substance-based views of personal identity still have adherents, psychologically-based accounts have achieved an undeniable prominence in contemporary analytic philosophy. Support for these views comes chiefly from thought experiments and puzzle cases. These cases are limited only by the imaginations of the philosophers who have offered them, and take a dazzling variety of forms. One important distinction to be drawn is between those cases which imagine a wholesale movement of a psychological life from one body to another and those which depict partial psychological change taking place within the scope of a single human life. The former category includes John Locke’s prince who “enters and informs” the body of a cobbler, as well as the teleportation, brain rejuvenation, and brain transplant cases found in more modern authors. The latter includes cases based on real-life situations (e.g. conversion, amnesia, brainwashing, dementia) as well as science fiction scenarios (e.g. involving evil neurosurgeons who can manipulate the brain to change traits or psychological states at will).

These two types of cases play somewhat different roles within the discussion of personal identity. The first is used essentially to show that personal identity

Abstract

Philosophical discussions of personal identity depend upon thought experiments which describe psychological vicissitudes and question whether the original person survives in the person resulting from the described change. These cases are meant to determine the types of psychological change compatible with personal continuation. Two main accounts of identity try to capture this distinction; psychological continuity theories and narrative theories. I argue that neither fully succeeds since both overlook the importance of a relationship I call “empathic access.” I define empathic access and discuss its role in a complete account of personal identity.

1 I have been helped at many stages with the preparation of this manuscript. I would like to thank the participants in the expert seminar on Personal Identity and Moral Identity, Free University, Amsterdam, February 1999 for their comments on a much earlier draft, and also the members of the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Institute for the Humanities 1998-99. Most especially, however, I would like to thank Jan Bransen and Stefaan Cuypers for their helpful suggestions, and Marc Slors for helping me think these issues out from beginning to end.
should be defined in terms of psychological rather than physical features. The second supports this case (by showing that the right kind or degree of psychological change within a human life threatens identity), but it also speaks to the more complicated question of what psychological continuation involves. Cases in which a person’s psychological life moves intact to a new venue make a good case for the claim that between body and mental life it is the continuation of mental life which is required for personal continuation, but fall short of telling us exactly what this entails. It is too much to require the exact preservation of psychological makeup for personal identity, since this is something we virtually never encounter. People do change in their beliefs, desires, character traits and values, and this does not usually imply a change of identity.2

A theorist who wishes to define personal identity in terms of psychological continuation thus needs to tell us what “psychological continuation” means, and this requires, among other things, specifying the degree and kind of psychological change that is permissible. A psychological account of identity must, that is, define the difference between ordinary personal development and identity-destroying psychological discontinuity. There have been two main attempts to offer such a definition in the literature: psychological continuity theories and narrative accounts. In what follows I will argue that neither is adequate to capturing this crucial distinction, at least with respect to one important class of thought experiments. With respect to the intuitions generated by these thought experiments, I claim, both psychological continuity theories and narrative views leave out a necessary ingredient which I call “empathic access.”3

I begin with a description of the class of thought experiments on which I will focus, offering two as representatives for further discussion, and briefly describing their importance in the discussion of personal identity and personal survival. I then show how the standard psychological accounts fail to capture the intuitions generated by these examples, and diagnose their failure by introducing the concept of empathic access. After further definition of empathic access and a sketch of some of work which will be needed to develop the concept further, I conclude by discussing the broader goal of providing a viable psychological account of personal survival.

2.

Puzzle cases raising the question of identity preservation through psychological change are very common in the literature on personal identity. David Lewis, for instance, imagines Methuselah living “much longer than a bare millennium” or having his life “punctuated by frequent amnesias, brainwashings, psychoanalyses, conversions, and what not,” and suggests that this will help us “make it literally true that he will be a different person after one and one-half centuries or

2 The issues involved in the dispute over whether identity is required for survival are tangential to those discussed here, and I wish to remain agnostic on them. I will thus use the terms “personal identity” and “personal survival” interchangeably. Wherever I have used “identity”, however, “survival” could be substituted.

3 I am grateful to Marc Slors for suggesting this term, and helping me to develop the concept it names.
so.” (Lewis, 1983, p.66) Perhaps the largest store of such cases, however, is to be found in Derek Parfit’s Reasons and Persons (1984). He gives us the “psychological spectrum” (a range of psychological surgeries in which a surgeon is able to replace anywhere from one to all of a person’s psychological features with those of Napoleon) (p.231); fusion (in which two or more people fuse into a single person who mixes and matches psychological states of the original people) (pp.302-3); and, like Lewis, cases of longevity with gradual psychological change (pp.303-5). These cases are used for a variety of purposes. In the course of such arguments, however, it is always assumed that there is some point at which psychological alteration will lead to a change in identity, and so a central purpose is to serve as a testing ground which can unearth our views about the conditions under which psychological change undermines identity.

Among the many creative science fiction scenarios described in the literature there are also many which draw upon more homey and ordinary cases of psychological change. These include cases like religious (or political) conversion, partial amnesia, dementia or just straightforward character change. Parfit offers examples of this sort as well. One such case is his story of a nineteenth century Russian couple. It revolves around a young Socialist who knows that he will inherit vast estates and fears that this change of fortune will alter his values. To protect his current ideals he tries to insure that the land he inherits will be given to the peasants even if he is corrupted by his new wealth. He signs a legal document which transfers the land – a document that can be revoked only with his wife’s consent – and tells her not to revoke it even if he later asks her to. He says “I regard my ideals as essential to me. If I lose these ideals, I want you to think that I cease to exist. I want you to regard your husband then, not as me, the man who asks you for this promise....” (Parfit, 1984, p.327). Although this may sound a bit melodramatic, we understand what he is saying, and Parfit suggests that we take his claim of changed identity seriously when considering the commitments on which his wife should act.

A similar, more contemporary example can also serve as a supplement to Parfit’s. Imagine a carefree and wild young woman who eventually settles down into a solid career, a marriage and motherhood. Growing into the responsibilities these life changes require, she may well change drastically. Her concerns about juggling her time, sorting out child care arrangements, getting the mortgage check in the mail, and framing her report in a way that will reflect well on the company will be a far cry from the old concerns about juggling dates, finding the most exciting parties, and initiating adventures. The responsible matron is going to think, feel and act quite differently from the party girl, and when her old friends try to drag her out for a night of revelry she might reply that the wild friend they knew is no more. The present woman does not care about the same things as the party girl, she does not have the capacity for witty bar chatter, nor the uncanny ability to locate parties. Her sleep patterns are different as are her thought patterns. She is, in many respects, a different subject in the same body.

These cases are more complicated than the science fiction examples, and in

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4 One (to which I shall return in the final section) is to show that the relation which matters to survival in identity admits of degrees (which, at least prima facie, identity cannot).
many ways more controversial. While both kinds of cases involve only partial psychological change, the extremes of the science fiction cases make it somehow more convincing that the radical changes in psychology they describe bring about a change of identity. In the ordinary cases, however, it may seem at best metaphorical to say that the psychological change described threatens personal survival. When a vicious criminal somehow finds religion and becomes a great and sincere spiritual leader, or when a carefree, outgoing person turns depressed and angry as the result of a setback, we might say that she has become a different person, but there is some sense in which we clearly do not mean it. The change is only remarkable because she also remain the same person. The same is true, of course, for our young Russian and party girl.

While there is something to this observation, the assumption that this makes such examples irrelevant or tangential to a philosophical investigation of personal identity is too hasty. This conclusion rests on the assumption that only the sense in which characters like the young Russian and party girl do survive (call this “basic” or “primitive” survival) is genuine survival, and that the sense in which they fail to survive (call this “subtle” survival) is only metaphorical. There is, however, no sound basis for this assumption. Note first that this more subtle sense of survival is clearly at issue in mainstream analytical discussions of personal identity. For one thing, while the lack of wild technologies may make cases like that of the young Russian sound less radical than fusions and combined spectrums, they raise essentially the same issues. In each case what we see is partial psychological change. More to the point, the case of the young Russian comes from Parfit; and we have already seen that Lewis’ Methuselah case rests on the psychological changes brought about by conversion, psychoanalysis and brainwashing. These kinds of examples are totally standard in the literature. At the very least, then, this more subtle form of survival is very much at stake in philosophical discussions of personal identity as they have been conducted.

There is, moreover, a reason for this. Although the kind of survival at issue in cases like these may not be the absolutely most basic sense, it is nonetheless one which is deeply important in our lives. It is this more subtle form of survival which is most deeply intermeshed with the many significant practical implications of personal continuation such as morality, self-interested concern, autonomy and authenticity. It is, moreover, this sense of survival which is woven into the many discussions in moral psychology which view the very existence of the person as dependent on his capacity to identify with some features of a human life, and which place the limits of the person at the limits of such identification.5 While this sense of survival may not be the only one which interests us, then, it is certainly not peripheral or unimportant, nor has it fallen outside of the realm of mainstream philosophical discussion of personal identity.

One strand of our thinking about personal identity – a strand that some of the foremost theorists of identity have been trying to capture – rests on the idea that radical enough psychological change literally brings about a loss of identity. Psychologically oriented identity theorists have set themselves the task of capturing the distinction between psychological changes which are survival-threatening in

5 See, for instance, Frankfurt (1976) and Taylor (1976) for some classic versions of this view.
this way and those which are benign. Analytic philosophy offers two major proposals for making this distinction. The first is found in psychological continuity theories, the second in narrative accounts. Each has an initial intuitive appeal, and each captures some important features of identity-preserving psychological continuation, but in the end neither succeeds.

3.

The psychological continuity theory begins with the intuition that what distinguishes cases of identity-undermining change from those of identity-preserving change is the abruptness with which the alterations take place. Here they take their inspiration from famous examples concerning the persistence of complex physical objects. The Ship of Theseus, for instance, is thought to survive a complete change in physical composition provided that this comes about by replacing one plank of the ship at a time over the course of many years. This is contrasted with the simultaneous replacement of all of the planks, which would count as building a replica. What is important, then, is that from each moment to the next there is a ship that differs only very slightly from the one before. This, it is often thought, provides the continuity that yields persistence. Similarly, psychological continuity theorists suggest, a person can survive a change in psychological make-up, provided that this change happens gradually, one belief, value, desire or trait at a time.

There is a great deal of initial plausibility to this understanding of psychological continuity. Changes which are violent and radical seem to disrupt identity, while changes which occur gradually, in small increments, are far more likely to constitute acceptable personal development. It does not take much reflection, however, to see that it is not the fact that the change is gradual which does the work here. While slow change is undoubtedly more likely than rapid change to represent psychological continuation, it is not inevitably so. Even quite gradual change can lead to a loss of identity of the sort we discussed earlier. To see this, we need only revisit our two examples. The young Marxist will likely have available the theoretical tools to describe something very like a brainwashing that happens gradually rather than all at once, and his transition to greedy landowner will not be any the more palatable to him for its slowness. Similarly, there seems no obvious reason why the serious matron should feel any more connected to the party girl because she was domesticated slowly rather than all at once. It is true that sudden, radical changes in psychological make-up are particularly jarring, and it is especially difficult to see how identity can be preserved in such cases. A person can, however, be robbed of her identity slowly as well as quickly, and a slow rate of psychological change is not enough to guarantee personal persistence.

The narrative view seems, initially to make good the deficits of the psychological continuity theory, but in the end it does not fully satisfy either. Many different views fall under the general rubric “narrative theory” but it is characteristic of all such views to claim that the life of a person has the form of a biographical narrative, which is to say that actions, events and experiences are made part of a single life by being bound together in an intelligible life story. This claim amounts to the requirement that the individual elements of a person’s life gain
their meaning – indeed their very content – from the broader context in which
they occur. Jerome Bruner, for instance, says that “A narrative is composed of a
unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as
characters or actors. These are its constituents. But these constituents do not, as
it were, have a life or meaning of their own. Their meaning is given by their place
in the overall configuration of the sequence as a whole – its plot or fabula.”
(Bruner, 1990, pp.43-4) Alisdair MacIntyre applies this insight specifically to the
lives of persons. He argues that the individual actions and experiences in a per-
son’s life cannot be understood outside of the context of a biography, telling us
that “successfully identifying and understanding what someone else is doing we
always move towards placing a particular episode in the context of a set of nar-
rative histories, histories both of the individuals concerned and of the setting in
which they act and suffer.” (MacIntyre, 1989, p.97)

Narrative theorists thus criticize psychological continuity theorists for having
an implausibly atomistic view of the psychological life of persons. They argue that
the individual beliefs, values, desires and traits that make up a person’s life can-
not be first identified as isolated elements at a time and then connected by rela-
tions of similarity to psychological features at other times as these theorists sug-
gest; but that the beliefs, values and desires that make up these connections are
already deeply intermeshed when we first identify them. Psychological change is
thus survivable on this view as long as there is a coherent narrative of change
which makes the latter psychological configuration the heir of the former.

The narrative theory seems possibly better placed to capture the idea that
acceptable changes must be internally generated developments, since it demands
an intelligible account of psychological transitions. A bit of reflection reveals that
intelligibility is not in itself enough to capture the distinction we are after either.
The young Russian will certainly be able to imagine a large number of narratives
describing his transition from man of the people to greedy landowner – it is pre-
cisely because such stories are common and compelling that he is so afraid such
a transition will take place. A similar point can be made about the serious matron.
The story of a free spirit worn away by the pressures of her culture is a completely
familiar one. The fact that a change in psychological make-up is narratively com-
prehensible will do little to overcome the sense of lost identity if the story told is
one of pure impulses inevitably corrupted by unacceptable material conditions
or, in the case of the serious matron, of youthful exuberance inexorably worn
away by age, care, and an oppressive social structure. Certainly there is a coher-
ent narrative of change in these cases, but all that shows is that there can be intel-
ligible stories of how someone loses his or her identity. The mere existence of a
comprehensible narrative of change is not yet enough to preserve identity.

The two standard accounts of psychological continuation thus do not capture
the kinds of connections that seem necessary to overcome the prima facie threat
to identity raised by psychological change. But this is not to say that they provide
no insight. The psychological continuity theory is correct in asserting that grad-
ual change is more likely than rapid change to result in personal continuation, and
this is an important datum. Narrative theories, although not usually presented
this way, can be seen as showing that it is not the slowness of change itself that is
doing the work here, and they go some distance toward uncovering the relevant
factor. These views show the importance of the intelligibility of change - psychological alteration which is violent, jarring and incomprehensible is almost certainly going to constitute a disruption of identity. If a change is going to count as personal development it seems essential that the change be part of an orderly progression from one psychological state to another. This helps to explain the appeal of the psychological continuity theory as well. Change that has the feature of intelligibility is also likely to happen gradually; in most instances a coherent narrative of change will unfold over time.

The psychological continuity and narrative theories of identity can be said, roughly, to have captured (related) features of psychological change which are (at least usually) necessary if the change is to be identity-preserving. What our discussion has shown, however, is that these conditions are not in themselves sufficient. These views have not yet completely identified the characteristics of identity-preserving change. They are missing a piece, and this piece, I shall argue, is empathic access.

4.

The demonstration that even narrative theories of personal identity do not go far enough involved constructing a story of psychological change that took the form of a coherent narrative and yet seemed identity-threatening. To determine what these theories lack, then, it will be useful to construct a story of psychological change which does seem identity-preserving and to try and identify the relevant difference. To this end we can contrast my story of the serious matron with the story of a somewhat-less-serious matron. This will provide a first approximation of empathic access which can then be filled out in more detail.

My original matron can remember her wild days, but she cannot recapture the passions, emotions, likes and dislikes that she once felt. She cannot understand how she could have enjoyed the music she once listened to endlessly, or been attracted to the men she was; how she could have been willing to stay up so late and suffer the next day. The behavior of the party girl is not incomprehensible to her in the sense that she cannot understand how a person with a particular set of desires and passions could make those choices; it is just that she, herself, is so alienated from those desires and passions that she cannot quite comprehend how she could have made those choices.

The somewhat-less-serious matron, by contrast, has not lost access to her past phenomenology; she has only placed it in a broader context which causes her to make different life choices. Such a woman may still remember well the excitement of getting ready for a Saturday night out; listening to the music she once loved may momentarily transport her back to her favorite clubs, and she may even feel a certain wistful nostalgia for those morning commutes to work after a particularly compelling week-night party. However, she may find that she has now grown older and wiser. She now also knows how empty, tedious, and ultimately disappointing those parties became; how pleasant it is now to get some rest; how much satisfaction she gets from her work and family; how burned-out and depressed many of her old friends are.

In such a case there is no profound alienation from the past, just a recogni-
tion of changed circumstances. When this woman sees her daughter making some of the same choices she once did she may not approve, but she will have a keen sense of what drives her, and of how disapproval from her elders will sound, and she may be spared the exasperated “you just don’t understand” to which the serious matron would be subjected. This affective connection to the past, together with its behavioral implications, forms the heart of what I have been calling “empathic access.” The relation that the not-so-serious matron has to her past is more than just cognitive recollection; the passions that belonged to the party girl are still there. She experiences them and they are represented in the decisions she makes. It is for this reason that this woman’s change seems like ordinary matura-
tion and development rather than a loss of identity. The alterations in lifestyle and outlook may be just as pronounced as those in the case of the serious matron, but these alterations are the result of an expansion of beliefs, values, desires and goals rather than a replacement. New decisions are informed by a recognition of the nature and pull of past characteristics.

Once this difference has been identified, however, it seems right that it should be an essential feature of the distinction between developing as oneself and turning into someone else. Empathic access involves a situation where the original psychological make-up is, in an important sense, still present in the later, psychologically-altered person. The earlier beliefs, values and desires are recognized as legitimate, and are given, so to speak, a vote in personal decision making. If there is anything that it can mean to persist through change, certainly it would be this. When a person fears turning into someone else as Parfit’s young Russian does, a large part of that fear is that one's current passions and ideals will be simply gone - that the future person will not be able to experience the fever of present convictions, or will give them no weight in action. Part of what it means to have empathic access to the past, however, is for both the phenomenological and behavioral connection we desire will be present. This should convey the flavor of what empathic access involves. Providing a precise definition of this relation is difficult, since it can take many forms. It is possible, however, to fill in a few more details by comparing and contrasting empathic access as I conceive it with related concepts found in the literature.

5.

First and foremost it is useful to contrast the connection afforded by empathic access with the kind of memory-connection which is often taken to be Locke’s proposal for a criterion of personal identity. Typically Locke is read as holding that for a person at t2 to be the same person as a person at t1 the person at t2 must remember the experiences of the person at t1. This is the original position on which psychological continuity theorists build their own views.

Over time, this insight has proved both attractive and frustrating. Something seems right about it, yet on reflection it is hard to make it viable as the backbone of a theory of personal identity. Comparing this connection to empathic access can help us to see why this is so. Remembering a past life-phase seems essential to being the same person who experienced that phase if we think of remembering (or failing to remember) not, as philosophers generally do, in a heavily cog-
nitive sense, but rather in the sense in which a teenager might complain that her parents no longer remember what it is like to be young. Typically such a teenager is not trying to imply a cognitive deficit in her parents' long-term recall capacities, but rather to indicate that they have lost touch with the affect associated with youth – its sensitivities and passions. Because “memory” is ambiguous between the mere ability to reproduce facts about the past and the ability to inhabit it psychologically, the claim that personal identity should be defined in terms of memory connection is simultaneously attractive and disappointing.

The type of ambiguity I have described here is laid out in exquisite detail by Richard Wollheim in *The Thread of Life* (1984). Wollheim offers an important taxonomy of mental states. In his discussion of memory Wollheim first defines “event-memory” as “that memory of events in which a person doesn’t simply remember that some event occurred, he remembers that event itself.” (p.101). Event-memory, like imagination and fantasy is an “iconic” state – roughly one which can be conceived as a sort of theatrical presentation to oneself. Like other iconic states it can be either “centered” or “acentered”. An “acentered” memory is one in which the event is remembered but from no particular point of view. Such memories are, in Wollheim's estimation, very rare, and quite unstable. (p.102) The more standard kind of event memory is “centered” – that is, it is remembered from a point of view, and that point of view is represented within the memory itself. This kind of memory, he says, shares certain features with other centered iconic states. The most crucial for our purposes are what he calls “plenitude” and “cogency.” He describes these as they apply to memory as follows:

> when I centrally remember someone doing something or other, I shall tend, liberally and systematically, to remember his feeling and experiencing, and his thinking, certain things: that is plenitude. And when I centrally remember someone feeling, experiencing, and thinking, certain things, I shall tend to find myself in the condition I would be in if I had felt, experienced, thought, those things myself: that is cogency. (Wollheim, 1984, p.105)

Event memory is thus, on his view, not a cold, cognitive relation to the past, but one which is thoroughly infused with affect.

Wollheim also notes that the affective and iconic features of centered event memory will have behavioral implications, and that it is these which make memory a relation which is constitutive of personal identity. He thus criticizes standard psychologically based accounts of personal identity in much the same way I have. He says these views,

> have treated [event-memory] as an exclusively cognitive phenomenon, or as a way in which we come to gain or preserve knowledge and belief. They have not recognized that feature of event-memory which I have called cogency, and, more particularly, they have not recognized the affective aspect of cogency as this is found in event-memory. (Wollheim, 1984, p.108)

As a result, he says, these theorists “have thought of event-memory as a purely backward-directed phenomenon....” (Wollheim, 1984, p.108)
Fundamentally I am in complete agreement with Wollheim’s analysis. The features present in centered event-memory as he describes it are exactly the features I am trying to capture in my notion of empathic access. My emphasis is slightly different than his, however, since I am interested specifically in the question of identity preservation through psychological change. Considering Wollheim’s taxonomy in this context raises questions which point toward an expansion of his view. In particular, it calls for a more detailed specification of what cogency amounts to – of what it means to “find oneself in the condition one would be in” having thought or experienced or felt the things one did in the past.

My point here will be clearer if I contrast one of Wollheim’s examples with one of mine. In describing centered event-memory Wollheim offers an event from his own life – an occasion in August 1944 when he drove by mistake into German lines. Having described the event and the memory he says, “and as I remember feeling those feelings, the sense of loss, the sense of terror, the sense of being on my own, the upsurge of rebellion against my fate, come over me, so that I am affected by them in some such way as I was when I felt them on that remote summer night.” (Wollheim, 1984, p.106, my emphasis). Here I want to focus on the “some such way,” which is necessarily vague. The reason it is there is because memories – even centered, iconic memories – are obviously not simple video-tapes exactly recreating the past. Wollheim says quite explicitly that “it is an exaggeration to say that in event-memory not only must the event that I remember be an event that I experienced, but I must also remember it as I experienced it.” (p.103) An “accurate” event-memory may leave out features of the actual experience or even add features that were not part of it. The deviation of memories from the experiences remembered will have to do at least partly with vicissitudes of mood and with changes in a person’s psychological makeup between the time of experiencing and the time of remembering some event. In the case of Wollheim’s memory, we can assume that his psychological makeup has stayed the same in relevant respects – at the time of remembering he still would find it horrible to be captured or shot – and so the cogency of the memory will not vary too widely from that of the experience itself.

My serious and somewhat-less-serious matrons are, however, both further along some kind of continuum of change in psychological makeup from their original experiences, and so things will be slightly different with them. The serious matron as I have described her is so altered that she is unable to have what Wollheim would consider a centered event-memory at all. The somewhat-less-serious matron, however, is in an intermediate position. The story is constructed so that she has affective access to the past, and so that her memory will be a forward-looking relation as well as a backward-looking one, and to this extent she is certainly having a centered event-memory. At the same time, however, we are to imagine that she is greatly psychologically changed from her earlier self. Because of this, the way in which her memory affects her – both emotionally and

6 Here I am talking about the character of the memory itself and not my secondary reactions to it. Obviously my reaction to some remembered event will depend upon my attitude towards the experience, and that may change (e.g. what once made me proud may now make me ashamed). I am suggesting, however, and I think Wollheim agrees, that the very character of the memory experience will also be affected by a person’s psychological makeup at the time of remembering.
behaviorally - will be different from the way it would have been if she had not changed so much. Remembering a party centrally from the point of view of one week later while preparing to go to another is certainly going to be a different experience from remembering that same party thirty years later while preparing to coach one’s daughter’s soccer team – even if the recollection from the later vantage point is accurate and fond.

This does not mean that the not-so-serious matron could not have empathic access to her past, since we have already acknowledged that centered event-memories can count as “accurate” while deviating from some details of the experience remembered. Still, as Wollheim also notes, “there are limits to this, and there couldn’t be any gross deviations within memory.” (Wollheim, 1984, p.103) I am interested in exploring what those limits are, in particular as they apply to questions of personal survival or continuation. Although it is likely impossible to come up with a tidy list of what kinds of deviation rob an event-memory of its identity-preserving qualities, it is nonetheless possible to shed some light on the basic parameters. To do this, it will be useful to proliferate matrons once again. Add to our existing cases, then, that of the “mortified matron.” This is a woman who remembers the past experiences of the party girl quite vividly – including access to the emotions, thoughts and feelings the party girl enjoyed – but who has altered in such a way that these recollections fill her with shame and disgust. She is not like the serious matron, who is rather indifferent to the actions and emotions of the party girl because she is so far-removed from them that her memories are non-iconic – memories that she did such-and-such without phenomenological access. The mortified matron does have such access, and that only makes her mortification worse. Certainly the phenomenology of her remembered party experiences will differ a great deal from those experiences as they occurred in the party girl. I am uncertain what Wollheim would say about whether such a memory would succeed as an instance of centered event-memory, but it would not count as empathic access. The strong repudiation of these past experiences undermines that relationship.

This claim may seem to degrade the plausibility of empathic access as an essential component of personal identity. Recall, however, that we are looking at one class of intuitions about personal survival – those brought about by examples like that of the young Russian – and the relation the mortified matron has to her past is not strong enough for survival in this sense. To see this, return again to the case of the young Russian. He is hardly likely to revise the judgment that he would not survive as a greedy landowner if we reassured him that the landowner would be able to recall and relive the thoughts, feelings and passions he is experiencing now, and that he would respond to these with horror and remorse, redoubling his efforts to wipe out the influence of such nonsense on young men. Certainly he would still tell his wife to view that person as someone else, and not to listen to his pleas to revoke the promise he has made to the peasants. Things are even clearer if we look at religious conversion, which is frequently cited as a case of identity-threatening psychological change. It could well be a feature of conversion (and reportedly often is) that the religious devotee retains vivid recollections of lusts and passions that he now finds shameful and horrible.

With respect to the project of defining this kind of survival it may seem, how-
ever, that we are essentially right back where we started. We know that the kind of exact (or near exact) recreation of a past experience that we might find in the party girl one week after a remembered party will count as empathic access, and that their recreation colored by fierce repudiation and horror found in the mortified matron is not. What we do not yet know is how much change with respect to the perception of earlier thoughts and emotions (and in their behavioral implications) is permissible before empathic access is lost. While it would certainly be difficult to provide a precise account of the parameters of acceptable change, the cases we have been considering do point to the relevant feature. The mortified matron has access to the feelings and thoughts of her past, what she lacks is the empathy - she is totally unsympathetic to the psychological life of the party girl. What is needed for empathic access is thus not an exact recreation of past emotions, thoughts and feelings, nor just some sort of ability to call them up from a first-person perspective. What is needed is this ability plus a fundamental sympathy for the states which are recalled in this way.

Something very close to this picture is described by Raymond Martin in Self-Concern: An Experiential Approach to What Matters in Survival (1998). Martin is concerned with the question of what relation a person must have to someone in the future to survive as that person. The relation which he defines in answering this question he calls “surrogate-self-identification.” The backbone of this relation involves appropriating anticipated future experiences. Appropriation of anticipated future events is in many ways the forward-directed parallel of the kind of centered event-memory Wollheim describes. It requires that persons experience affect of some sort that normally they would experience only when anticipating their own future experiences; second, they cognitively contextualize the anticipated experiences similarly to the way ordinarily they cognitively contextualize only their own future experiences; and third, they behave as if the future experience were their own. (Martin, 1998, pp.107-8)

What is most important for present purposes, however, is the general discussion with which Martin introduces his view. He defines empathy as the ability to know and understand what someone else is thinking or feeling. Sympathy on his view, “requires more. To be sympathetic with another, one must not only be empathic with the other but also adopt at least some of the other’s (relevant) objectives.”(Martin, 1998, p.98) And a sympathetic person will do this, he says, partly because sympathy involves sharing in the feelings of the other person. Appropriation is, on his view, a sort of “super sympathy.”

I thus wish to supplement Wollheim’s view with Martin’s insistence that sympathy involves at least a limited adoption of the objectives of the person whose feelings, thoughts and emotions are shared. It will, of course, be somewhat tricky to say what this means in practice. The somewhat-less-serious matron is not going to adopt the objectives of the party girl in the sense that she is going to revert to her lifestyle. The emotions overlaying her vivid recollections of the party girl’s experiences may be amusement or even embarrassment, and this may lead the somewhat-less-serious matron to act directly counter to some of the party girl’s intentions or desires. However, her embarrassment will be the friendly
embarrassment of remembering the naive passion of a first love rather than the 
hostility the religious convert feels to his former sinful impulses. What this means 
is that these past feelings and objectives can be given some weight in determin-
ing what to do, even if they are eventually outweighed by other considerations. 
This is in contrast to the mortified matron, who will give these objectives no 
weight at all.

Making the parallel case with the young Russian may clarify this distinction 
further. We could imagine a future landowner who remembers well the passions 
and thoughts of the young Socialist, and who takes them to heart even though he 
no longer chooses to act on them. From his older and wiser perspective he might 
recognize certain of his earlier impulses as naive or ill-considered; he might have 
changed his economic views without losing compassion for the peasants, or see 
things in shades of gray that were not visible to him in his impassioned youth. In 
this sense, then, he rejects his earlier thoughts and emotions. He might still, how-
ever, give them weight. Part of what this might mean is that he feels the need to 
justify to himself deviations from his past ideals. In this way, his old impulses act 
as a check on the new, making him consider carefully his motives or drawing him 
back to a more balanced picture when he starts getting too involved in running 
his estate. Even though this landowner may not make any of the same choices the 
young Socialist did, the young Socialist is alive within him as an ongoing source 
of questions for self-scrutiny and as a pair of eyes through which he must judge 
himself. While the young Russian might still deny that he could possibly be any 
kind of landowner - even the one I have just described - in this case the claim 
sounds more like adolescent hyperbole and less like an acute awareness of self-
defining values.

I thus believe that Martin is right about the need for this kind of sympathy in 
personal survival. Where I differ with him is in his emphasis on the forward-look-
ing relationship of anticipation. Martin's primary concern is with the question of 
whether identity is what matters in survival - a claim Parfit among others has 
challenged. Because of this framework, Martin focuses on the question of what 
relation I must have to some future person in order to be concerned about her 
experiences in the way I am typically concerned only about my own. His con-
clusion is that I must be able to identify with that future person in the manner 
described above. While he acknowledges that a person can also identify with 
someone in the past in the same way, he spends most of his time discussing for-
ward-looking identification.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this strategy, but it can mislead by 
deflecting attention from the importance of the backward-looking relation. Mar-
tin concludes that to know if I will survive in some future person I need to ask 
whether I, now, can identify with that (anticipated) person - whether I appropri-
ate her experiences and feel the right sort of sympathy for her. I suggest that 
instead I need to know whether she will identify with me, and take the right sort 
of attitude toward my experiences. What I want in survival is that I be represent-
ed in the right way in the future. It is thus not whether I give weight to the desires 
and feelings of an anticipated future that is fundamentally at issue, but rather 
whether the future person will give weight to mine - whether the passions and 
desires I have now will be represented in a future life. The problem for the young
Russian is not primarily that he is unsympathetic to the views of the greedy landowner (although of course he is) but that he believes the landowner could not, almost by definition, sympathetically experience the passions he feels now. It is this latter deficit and not the former which makes him feel he will not survive.

The question of whether we can sympathetically imagine and appropriate the experiences of a future person is, of course, also a question of great moment and is in no way unrelated to the question of what personal survival entails. My point is, however, that it is a secondary relation that is dependent on the more primary question of whether a future self will sympathetically appropriate the present one. Indeed, it is most likely that the tendency to appropriate the experiences of an anticipated future person in the way Martin describes comes from a belief that that future person will represent one's current values, intentions and emotions in an acceptable way.

I thus take from Wollheim (and, of course, Locke) the intuition that personal survival depends primarily on backward-looking relations; being the survivor of some past person depends upon having the right kind of recollection of the experiences of that past person, and being the survivor of some future person depends upon that person having the right kind of recollection of my present experiences. Additionally, I take from Wollheim the idea that the right kind of recollection must be at least in part iconic in nature, and must be a centered memory so that the rememberer actually inhabits, in some version, the emotions, thoughts, and feelings of the person remembered. From Martin I take the additional requirement of a generally sympathetic (or at least non-hostile) attitude toward those emotions, thoughts and feelings. This package - centered event memory with sympathy - is the basic make-up of what I have been calling "empathic access." It is this relation which I put forth as the factor which distinguishes between personal development and identity-threatening change in the cases we have been considering.

6.

While an appreciation of the importance of empathic access resolves some puzzles concerning personal identity (i.e. why the standard psychological criteria seem so unsatisfying in the end) it raises a number of new ones. Most of these have to do with (1) understanding just what empathic access is and (2) clarifying the exact nature of the role it plays in personal identity. The project of articulating these puzzles - let alone solving them - is a daunting one, and obviously not one I can complete here. I can, however, outline some of the more pressing difficulties facing the development of an account of personal identity based on empathic access and say a few words about how they might be addressed.

One immediate problem for a view relying on empathic access is an epistemological one - how is it that we can know whether a person really has empathic access to her past? The problem here is not the general problem of knowing other minds, but a more specific concern connected to the nature of empathic access. The concern that empathic access is meant to overcome is that in relevant respects a person who existed at an earlier time has ceased to be - that that per-
son is no longer represented either phenomenologically or behaviorally in the person who succeeds her. However, in some sense we only ever have the later person to talk to, and the difficulty is that it seems as if we must take her word for it that empathic access has been preserved.

A parent may insist, for instance, that she remembers very well what young love felt like. However, now that she is older and wiser, she might say, she must insist on strict rules for her own son, because now she also has access to how her mother felt and is able to weigh the considerations against one another. Despite a lively, empathic recall of how hard it is to be kept from one's love, she might claim, she must decide differently than she would have before. In such a case this woman's son may be inclined to challenge her claim of empathic access to her youth. Speaking in the terms we have laid out here, he might insist that if her old self were really still present she would rage against her misrepresentation by this middle-aged woman who claims (and maybe even believes) that that part of herself is still alive. It is not always easy to know who to believe in such circumstances. An acceptable criterion of personal identity based on empathic access must address these concerns. They are complex, but I think not at all insurmountable. The means for determining when empathic access is present falls directly out of the nature of this relation. It requires that a person retain some sympathy for the psychological features of the life phase to which she retains access. It is therefore to be assumed that there will be tell-tale signs that a person really does or does not have genuine empathic access to the past. This sympathy is, after all, supposed to have behavioral implications. Among others is the fact that a person feels the need to give weight to the remembered impulses, and so to be able to justify overriding them in favor of others. The demeanor of the mother with empathic access to her teenage years – the kinds of explanations she will give for her actions, the kind of regret she will feel at the restrictions she imposes, the kind of second-guessing of her decisions that she might engage in – will be different from that of the mother who lacks such access. It will not, of course, be possible to tell in every single case whether access is retained, but in general there will be fairly reliable indicators.

The epistemic problem is, therefore, not terribly grave. It does, however, point to a deeper problem. While there may be no serious difficulty determining from a person's behavior roughly what degree of sympathetic access to past experiences she retains, the vagueness of the term "sympathy" may still leave room for disagreement about whether a person indeed has empathic access to the past. The mother in our example may provide explanations and behavioral cues that show she is giving some weight to past thoughts and feelings – that she is not rejecting them outright. Still, her son might argue that she weighs them so differently from the way she would have as a teenager that she is essentially giving them no weight at all. Here we are once again coming up against the difficulty of specifying just how much a memory can be recast by subsequent changes in personality before it no longer counts as an identity-preserving recollection. Since both the accuracy with which a past experience is recreated in memory and the amount of sympathy felt towards it are clearly matters of degree, it becomes obvious that empathic access must be as well, and in the middle ranges it is not clear what is to be said about personal survival.
To respond to this worry it is essential first of all to appreciate that this is not a feature of my view alone, but of all of the standard psychological views of personal identity. Both psychological continuity and narrative continuity are relations of degree, and their advocates have had to consider how to reconcile this with the fact that personal survival is, prima facie, all-or-nothing. Parfit, for one, has taken this issue on directly. Assuming that identity, by definition, must be an all-or-nothing relation he introduces an arbitrary cut-off ( "at least half the number of direct connections that hold over every day, in the lives of nearly every actual person." ) to stipulate the degree of connection necessary for preserving identity. (Parfit, 1984, p.207) He insists, however, that the need for arbitrary stipulation makes identity essentially unimportant, and that the relation we care about, survival, is indeed a matter of degree. Parfit is not the only one. Lewis, too, makes it clear that survival can be a question of degree. (Lewis, 1983, pp.67-70). In this context, then, it is not a special problem for empathic access that it is a relation of degree, and that there is no clear point at which it can be said no longer to hold.

The context itself, however, is unsettling to many. It is not only identity, but survival itself which seems to many to be an all-or-nothing relation. This worry can be easily overcome, however, by remembering that there are different notions of survival operating unrecognized in discussions of personal continuation. What I have called before the most basic or primitive conception of survival – the question of whether I will continue as some at least minimally sentient being in the future – does indeed seem, on the face of it, to be an all-or-nothing relation (although I’m not convinced that in the end it truly is). When we consider the more subtle (but still crucially important) sense of survival at issue in the cases we have been looking at, however, it seems unproblematic that this sort of survival should admit of degrees.

This said, it must still be acknowledged that even within this more limited context empathic access on its own does not seem a totally viable account of survival. For one thing, this relation requires a particularly vivid and intimate connection to past experiences, but does not require that they be put into any kind of unified context. On its own empathic access to the past might be a hodgepodge of intense feelings, emotions and thoughts with no order to them. Moreover, the relation that is needed to guarantee the sort of survival we are discussing will need to relate a present life stage to a past one – e.g. the phase of matronhood to that of party girl – as well as relating a particular present moment to a single past experience. By itself, empathic access seems ill-suited to this task. We can hardly demand that the matron sympathetically and iconically recollect the thoughts, feelings and emotions of the entire decade of the party girl’s wild days – this is too many inner states to maintain even dispositionally. What is needed instead is a more modest connection to that era, together with enough empathic access to enable sympathetic phenomenological and behavioral representation of that era in the present.

It is for this reason that I have called empathic access “the missing ingredient” in personal survival. I do not mean it to carry the whole weight of defining survival, even in the limited and specific sense that is at issue here. Instead I see it as a necessary supplement to the relations which have been proposed. My sug-
gestion – although I cannot fully develop or defend it here – is that the most satisfying view of personal identity will be a combination of a narrative view with empathic access. The basic idea would be that personal identity over time consists in the existence of a coherent narrative of change which includes empathic access. The narrative provides a basic level of continuity while the empathic access provides the additional ingredient necessary for true personal survival. This is a plausible approach since the original insight about empathic access came from considering the characteristics of those narratives that seemed to preserve personal identity.

There is obviously much more work to be done in developing this view. Still, I think some important insights have been gained. First, we have seen that there are many distinct questions of survival at issue in philosophical work on personal identity, and that we must be clear which we are addressing. The question of how these senses of survival interconnect is, of course, an extremely important one, but this should not keep us from recognizing them as distinct. Second, we have seen that the relatively subtle form of personal survival at issue in cases like that of the young Russian and serious matron are not derivative or peripheral, but deeply important philosophically. Third, we have seen that the traditional psychological accounts of personal identity cannot capture this form of survival; and fourth, that if we do wish to capture it we need to provide a criterion of survival which gives a central role to empathic access. Such a criterion will not resolve all of our questions about personal identity, but it can answer some important ones and clarify what still needs to be asked.

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