A Response to Bernard Williams on Personal Identity and Bodily Continuity

August 25th, 2022

Abstract

This paper explores the question of whether bodily continuity is a necessary condition for the continuation of personal identity, drawing on Bernard Williams' two thought experiments in "The Self and the Future." I note how Williams' presentation of these thought experiments inadequately accounts for the concept of past and future projection, arguing that projection is an important consideration in questions of personal identity. I contend that taking the importance of projection into account leads us to the conclusion that bodily continuity is not a necessity for a continuation of personal identity.

I. Introduction

Bernard Williams' 1970 article "The Self and the Future" provides a first-person perspective and a third-person perspective on a thought experiment that raises a paradox regarding personal identity. Notably, the concept of personal identity being explored by Williams, and which I also explore further in this paper, is not the kind that deals with identifying with a persona or a community. Rather, it is the philosophical sense of personal identity that explores our sense of self, the core question being, what are the important factors that come into play when we attribute a consistent "me" to versions of ourselves that exist in different points in time?

Using two perspectives on the same thought experiment, Williams aims to show that whether we think about personal identity in regard to ourselves or in regard to others alters the verdict on what we think is important when considering what sustains "me" as the same person through the past, present, and future, which I will call personal continuity. In particular, the crucial difference for Williams is whether sustaining the same body, which I call bodily continuity, is necessary for personal continuity. Considering this question from two perspectives, first-person and third-person, is important because although personal identity is an important philosophical question that can be theorized from an intellectual point of view, our own experience of personal identity ultimately matters to us too; it matters whether my personal dispositions, experiences, mistakes, and accomplishments are attributable to the person that I subjectively know is "me."

In this essay, I begin by explaining Williams' thought experiment and how it raises this paradox: given the seemingly same thought experiment, the third-person perspective rejects the need for bodily continuity in personal continuity, but the first-person perspective necessitates it. I

then argue that the third-person perspective offers the correct verdict by pointing out an account considered in the third-person case but lacking in the first-person case; that is, the first-person perspective as presented by Williams fails to consider our ability to project into the past. I will explain how this importance of projecting into the past goes beyond a merely memory-based argument for personal identity because of the unique imaginative process employed in the act of projection. Finally, I illustrate how including this consideration would weaken Williams' original verdict such that the first-person perspective would not actually contradict the third-person verdict, thus bodily continuity turns out not to be a necessary condition for personal continuity.

II. The Thought Experiment

I will begin with the third-person perspective. Williams asks us to take two persons, A and B, who participate in a certain procedure. I will refer to the persons as A and B, and each of their respective bodies as the A-body and B-body. After the procedure, the A-body will have the memories, experiences, and dispositions of B, such that the person present in the A-body will be practically indistinguishable from B to those who know B (and vice-versa, the person now in the B-body will be practically indistinguishable from A to those who know A).[1] To avoid assuming who the persons in the A-body and B-body now are, let us simply refer to the person in the A-body after the procedure as the "A-body-person" and the person in the B-body after the procedure as the "B-body-person." Say that before the procedure, the experimenter told A and B that one of the resulting two persons, either the A-body-person or the B-body-person, will receive $100,000, while the other will be tortured. A chooses that the B-body-person gets $100,000 and the A-body-person receives torture, and B conversely chooses that the A-body-

[1] B. Williams, (1970). The Self and the Future, in *The Philosophical Review, 79*(2), 46

person receives $100,000 while the B-body-person receives torture. The experimenter decides to follow B, giving the A-body-person $100,000 and torturing the B-body person.

Williams claims that after the procedure, the B-body-person receiving torture can rightfully complain that this is not the outcome he chose, because he now has A's memories and dispositions. Conversely, the A-body-person receiving $100,000 feels pleased at the fact that the experimenter did what he chose, because he now has B's memories and dispositions.[2] Although the A-body-person is inside the A-body, he identifies with the choice that B made, and the B-body-person identifies with the choice that A made. This suggests that the A-body-person now identifies as B and the B-body person now identifies as A, which in turn implies that bodily continuity is not necessary for the continuation of personal identity.[3] Although A now has a different body, he still identifies as A, and the same applies for B, suggesting that both A and B still feel a continuation of their personal identity even with new bodies.

However, Williams complicates this verdict by presenting the case through a first-person perspective.[4] Rather than persons A and B, we are asked to consider "me" as the subject of the thought experiment, which might complicate our initial intuitions. He asks us to consider several stages of information that we receive from someone regarding our upcoming torture. Imagine that someone tells me that I am going to be tortured tomorrow. I am then told that I will not remember being told about this. Then, I am told that at the time of torture I will lose all of my memories. After this, I am told that I will receive a different set of memories or impressions of my past. Lastly, I am told that this new set of memories and impressions will exactly fit the past of another living person, as if the information in his brain was copied into mine.

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[2] Williams, 49
[3] Williams, 51
[4] Williams, 52

Williams thinks that at every stage of information received, we would still feel fear for ourselves because we expect torture to happen to us, suggesting that we expect a continuation of personal identity although we lose all of our memories.[5] This conclusion seems reasonable; although I know I will have my memories replaced, I still believe and am fearful that these are all things that will happen to "me," rather than dissociating myself from the situation by believing another person will take my place. By the end of this first-person case, Williams believes we are presented with the same scenario as the third-person case; new memories and impressions have been implanted into a body such that the person in this body now cannot associate with the old memories and impressions previously in this body. The third-person case concludes that the person in this body is now a different person. But in this first-person case, Williams' claim that we still feel fear for ourselves after every stage of information suggests that we expect to be the same person even though we know our current memories and dispositions will be replaced with new ones. Because the continuation of our body is the only significant unchanging factor in this case, it implies that bodily continuity is necessary when considering personal identity. To apply this conclusion to the third-person perspective, this would mean that A and B do not "switch bodies"; A would still be the A-body-person and B would still be the B-body-person.

It appears that the verdicts from each perspective cannot both be true at the same time; they each consider the same scenario, but the third-person case rejects bodily continuity while the first-person case requires it. Williams is more inclined to accept the first-person conclusion that bodily continuity is necessary, such that A and B do not switch bodies, and the person being tortured is the same person being told the information. He claims that in the third-person case,

[5] Williams, 52

the experimenter has not "induced" a change in bodies, but merely chosen the neatest scenario in which we are most inclined to believe that there has been an exchange of bodies. Meanwhile, the idea in the first-person case that we expect to feel pain seems "positively straightforward".[6]

III. Past and Future "Projection"

However, I argue that the first-person case is not so straightforward upon further analysis. The first-person perspective as it stands is lacking when considering the concept of projection, that is, our ability to imaginatively insert ourselves into different points in time given a certain understanding of who we are. While the third-person scenario acknowledges our ability to project both into the past and the future, the first-person scenario focuses only on our ability to project into the future. This is important to consider because when we project into the past, we actively attribute our current identity to our past self and posit that our past self would also be able to attribute their identity to who we are today. Whether we can do this in the first-person portrayal of the thought experiment is questionable, making the continuation of personal identity unclear. I will first explain this idea of projecting into the past and clarify why this is not merely a memory-based argument by illustrating the unique imaginative capabilities that we employ in projection.

Williams claims that when we project ourselves into the future and imagine torture happening to our body, the changing of our psychological states does not exclude the fact that we think we will undergo pain and suffering.[7] However, to feel a continuation of our personal identity, we expect that our future expectations of experiences *and* our past history of experiences all involve the same person that we currently feel we are. The third-person verdict

[6] Williams 62-63
[7] Williams 53

takes this into account; when the A-body-person projects themselves into the past, they identify with B's choices and memories. Furthermore, the A-body-person feels pleased that their choice will lead to them receiving $100,000, indicating that they expect their future self who receives the money to be the same person as their past self who made the choice. Because the A-body-person can project themselves as B in both the past and the future, there is a sense that B's personal identity is continuous regardless of the change in body.

But in defense of Williams' view, one might point out that by claiming that our projections into the past is important, we assume that merely memory is what is important to identity. And if we assume a memory-based view of personal identity, it seems as if we oversimplify the complexities that come into play when conceptualizing a sense of self; after all, people often forget many of their past experiences but still identify with them. For instance, I may completely forget an experience from my childhood, but when my parent recounts the experience to me, I comprehend that the child in the story is still "me". Although I learn new information about my child-self, I identify with that child and acknowledge that my forgotten childhood memories have still shaped the current "me", even if I had forgotten that specific information about myself.

However, I am not assuming that memory is what is important to identity, but rather that the overall ability to project oneself into different points in time is an important consideration in presenting the thought experiment. Williams believes that in the first-person case, it is straightforward that we feel fear when projecting ourselves into the future, and that this is important when considering the continuation of personal identity. If this act of projection is important, it is unclear why it must be specific to the future. The crucial difference might be that we have not experienced the future yet, and thus the important aspect of projecting into the

future is that we apply our understanding of our dispositions in an imaginative way to place ourselves in scenarios we have not experienced yet. However, projecting into the past also practices this imaginative ability. I can project myself into a past experience yet imagine acting in a completely different way than I actually did, imagining the different scenarios and feelings that would arise. I know that in this projection, it is "me" who is acting, and I apply my understanding of "me" when I think about how I could have acted differently in a past experience, even if I know that I did not actually act differently. In a sense, this is the same imaginative practice as projecting myself into the future.

An example might make this clearer. Say that one month ago I amicably broke up with my partner. This scenario is now in my memory, I know that I did this, and I resonate with the feeling of sadness that I know I felt during the breakup. However, I can still project myself into this point in the past and imagine different scenarios that still involve the same "me." I imagine that instead of accepting an amicable breakup, my partner had become extremely angry and started yelling; I feel fear for what could have happened to me in this situation and I imagine that I would have cried because I know myself to be a sensitive person. This scenario did not actually happen, but I am able to place myself in this projection of the past, imagine how I would have acted because I know my personal dispositions, and feel fear for my past self.

In application to Williams' thought experiment, this example of projecting into the past employs the same process that occurs when we project ourselves into the future and feel fear for the torture. For clarity, when applying this idea to the thought experiment I will consistently refer to the person being questioned as "current 'me'" and the tortured person as a "future person". Because past and future projection employ the same imaginative process, for Williams' thought experiment to remain consistent the future person should resonate with and feel fear for the

current “me” when projecting herself into a past scenario where she is told about the torture. But it is reasonable to think that because the future person experiencing torture will not have any recognition of my current dispositions and memories, she cannot resonate with the person currently in my body. When this future person projects herself into past experiences, she projects a past self who aligns with her new memories and characteristics that have no connection to the current “me”.

For example, suppose that in Williams’ thought experiment, the current “me” being questioned is very timid and the future person being tortured is extremely courageous. If the future person was asked to imagine being told in the past that she would be tortured, she would not feel fearful for her past self and posit that this past self would have wanted to face the torture head-on. But if the current, timid, “me” was the same person as the one being tortured, the answer to this question would be different; I would posit that past “me” would have felt extremely fearful and I would have felt fear for this past self. It is unlikely that timid “me” and the courageous future person would subjectively be able to identify as the same person, even with the same body.

Of course, dispositions can change drastically over time. However, even with drastic changes, there is an awareness of change, such that the courageous “me” would be able to acknowledge that I was once timid. But in the thought experiment, the future person would not be able to attribute this timidness to herself at all. It is not just a change in disposition, but rather a new sense of personal identity altogether. Even if current “me” can project myself into the future and feel fearful for this psychologically altered person in my body, if I consider that this future person will feel so drastically removed from “me” with my current dispositions, then it is difficult to accept that the two are the same person even if the body is shared. The continuation

of personal identity is unclear, thus, looking at the first-person case in this way raises no real objection to the verdict in the third-person case. Our sense of personal identity and our ability to project ourselves into different points in time are closely intertwined, therefore when considering this act of projection into the future, Williams should also consider our ability to project imaginatively into the past. I believe that with this consideration, we would be less convinced that the first-person case presents a continuation of personal identity and would be more drawn to accept the third-person conclusion that bodily continuity is not necessary for personal continuity.

IV. Conclusion

In this essay, I have presented a thought experiment by Williams from a first-person perspective and a third-person perspective, and have argued for acceptance of the third-person perspective that bodily continuity is not necessary for the continuation of personal identity. I have done so by illustrating how the first-person case lacks the important consideration of imaginative projection into the past, and how including this consideration undermines the contradictive force of the first-person conclusion. I have emphasized why this act of imaginative projection is an important factor in considering how we are able to identify with ourselves in past and future situations, and thus it is an important factor to recognize in discussing issues of personal identity and continuity.

Bibliography

Williams, B. (1970). The Self and the Future. *The Philosophical Review, 79*(2), 161-180. doi:10.2307/2183946.