# IS CONNECTEDNESS NECESSARY TO WHAT MATTERS IN SURVIVAL?

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*Abstract*

The standard version of the psychological criterion or theory of personal identity takes it that psychological connectedness is not necessary for personal identity, or for what matters in survival. That is, a future person can be you, and/or have what matters in survival for you, even though there is no psychological connectedness between you and that future person. David Lewis, however, holds that psychological connectedness is necessary to both identity and what matters (which he takes to coincide). This entails, Lewis acknowledges, that if a human body were to live longer than connectedness lasts, then that body would 'embody' or 'constitute' a different person later on than it did to begin with. Moreover, Lewis accepts, a body may embody more than one person at any one time. Lewis claims that this can be reconciled to some degree with common sense if we count by person stages rather than by persons. I show, though, that Lewis' view cannot be salvaged in this way, and, moreover, that it leads to further absurdities. I conclude that as an account of identity and of what matters in survival, it is highly implausible, and most unsatisfactory.

## 1. Introduction

Most who accept the psychological theory of personal identity, such as Derek Parfit (1986) and Sydney Shoemaker (1984), appear to accept that while psychological connectedness can be a part of what matters in survival, it is not necessary. What matters in survival can exist when connectedness does not, as long as psychological continuity exists.

David Lewis, however, explicitly holds that connectedness is necessary to what matters in survival; continuity by itself is not enough (1976, 29–31). Although I am somewhat sympathetic to the intuitions underlying this view, I shall argue that it is untenable.

## 2. Outline of the Psychological Theory and the Connectedness View

The standard psychological theorist claim is that for person $B$ at $t_2$ to be the same person as $A$ at $t_1$, $B$ must be 'R-related' to $A$, and there must be no other person who exists at $t_2$ who is R-related to $A$. $B$ is R-related to $A$ if $B$ is psychologically connected and/or continuous with $A$. $B$ is psychologically connected to $A$ if there are certain kinds of direct relations between $B$'s psychological states and $A$'s. $B$ is strongly psychologically connected to $A$, according to Parfit, if there exists, between $B$ and $A$, 'at least half the number of direct connections that hold, over every day, in the lives of nearly every person' (1986, 222). $B$ is psychologically continuous with $A$ if $B$ is strongly psychologically connected with $A$, or if there exist overlapping chains of strong psychological connectedness between $B$ and $A$.

Parfit also makes the seemingly-radical claim that what matters in the way that we normally take our continued existence to matter is not in fact our continued existence (that is, not our identity), but relation R, which can hold between non-identical people. He describes this fact by saying that relation R is 'what matters in survival'. He argues for this view by way of a 'fission' case, where $A$ fissions into $B$ and $C$. $A$ is neither $B$ nor $C$ (because $A$ can't be two separate people), but according to Parfit both $B$ and $C$ have what matters to $A$ in survival, because they are both R-related to $A$.

Lewis, however, does not accept that there is any difference between identity and what matters in survival (see Lewis 1976). He argues that whenever you have what matters in survival, you have identity, and vice versa. (By identity, though, Lewis does not mean strict numerical identity, but a relation between person stages which he labels the 'I-relation'.)

The standard version of the psychological theory holds that only continuity is necessary to identity and what matters in survival, that is, that relation R exists even if only continuity exists. This is not to say that connectedness does not matter in survival when it exists, only that what matters in survival can exist without connectedness (see, e.g., Parfit 1986, 207, 267). Lewis, however, supposes that connectedness is also necessary. I call the latter view the 'connectedness' version of the psychological theory.

### 3.  Overpopulation and overlapping people

The connectedness view cannot be taken to be holding that *strong* connectedness is necessary to relation R. It can only suppose that some connectedness is necessary, for it would otherwise entail that I did not exist when I was a child, because I am not strongly connected to myself as a child. The number of direct connections that hold between myself now and myself as a child are less than 'half the number of direct connections that hold, over every day, in the lives of nearly every person'. However, if only some degree of connectedness is necessary, then this problem is avoided, for while I am not strongly connected to myself as a child, I am connected to some degree to myself as a child. This seems to be Lewis's view, for he agrees with Parfit that relation R can be a matter of degree, but neither strong connectedness nor continuity are a matter of degree – only connectedness is.

There will, however, be possible cases where connectedness eventually 'runs out'. Lewis considers such a possible case. He supposes that there exists a 969-year-old Methuselah for whom connectedness stops every 137 years (1976, 30–31). This entails that more than one person must have existed in that body over the 969-year period. Some people will find such a claim counter-intuitive, but this cannot form the basis for any objection to the connectedness view, because we are here assuming the psychological theory, and all psychological theorists are committed to the possibility that the one body may have associated with it, over its lifetime, more than one person. In cases where psychological continuity is lost – for example, in a 'brain-zap' case where someone's psychology is destroyed, and then replaced by another psychology – the psychological theory entails that the person who exists in that body after the break in continuity is numerically distinct from the person who existed before the break. So psychological theorists who do not accept the connectedness view cannot object to it on this ground.

However, the connectedness view has far more counter-intuitive consequences than this. As Lewis readily concedes, the number of people who exist 'in' Methuselah will be extremely large, and perhaps infinite. What is more, they will overlap:

> There are infinitely many different 137-year segments that include all of Methuselah's stages on his 300th birthday. One begins at the end of his 163rd birthday and ends at the end of

his 300th birthday; another begins at the beginning of his 300th and ends at the beginning of his 437th. Between these two are a continuum of other 137-year segments . . . Every one of them is a continuant person . . . (1976, 31).

## 4.  Lewis's proposed solution

For Lewis, though, not only are overlapping people not a problem, they are the only way of making sense of fission cases, for he has argued that if *A* fissions into *B* and *C*, then *A* must have really been two people, *B* and *C*, all along (1976, 25–9; 1983c, 73–6). So Lewis thinks that we should accept overlapping people anyway.

It is one thing to say that there are two people existing in your body now, if it is the case that this body is going to fission later on. But does it make sense to say that there may be a very large number of people, perhaps an infinite number, existing at one time in the same body, and, what is more, in a body which is not going to fission? How are we to answer the following question, if the connectedness view is true? You, *A*, are alone in a room. How many people are really in the room? One? Or some untold number?

Lewis thinks that the answer to this problem is to count by person stages rather than by continuant persons. So if *A* is alone in a room, then we should say that there is only one person in that room, because only one person stage exists at that time in that room. That person stage is a temporal part of a huge number of continuant persons, but we should count by person stages rather than by persons, so that we do not have to commit ourselves to absurdities when we answer the question, 'How many people are in that room?'

Lewis says:

You may feel certain that you count persons by identity, not by tensed identity. But how can you be sure? Normal cases provide no evidence. When no stages are shared, both ways of counting agree. They differ only in the problem cases: fission, fusion . . . The problem cases provide no very solid evidence either. They are problem cases just because we cannot consistently say all the things we feel inclined to. We must strike the best compromise among our conflicting initial opinions. Something must give way: and why not the opinion that of course we count by identity, if that is what can be sacrificed with least total damage? (1976, 27–8).

Lewis's claims that we cannot do justice to all our intuitions, and that we will have to strike a compromise, are all very well. However, his claim about the evidence we have from normal cases not being very solid glides over the important point. As Lewis will admit, we can distinguish between persons and person stages. Suppose, then, we asked someone, 'How many persons are in that room?', and we received an answer. Why couldn't we then specify our question by saying, 'I meant that question literally. I am asking how many *persons* are in that room, as opposed to person stages?' The answer to this question will not be 'One', if the connectedness view is true.

Lewis may still want to claim that we should nevertheless count by person stages, so that we can strike the best compromise amongst our competing intuitions. However, if we are to replace our concern with ourselves in such situations (even if this concerns only counting) with a concern for something else, such as a person stage, we will need some good reasons. It is doubtful, though, whether Lewis has provided any such good reasons. And when we see the further problems that beset Lewis's view, we will see that it is extremely doubtful whether any of the advantages of his view could outweigh the disadvantages.

## 5.  How many person stages exist in an hour?

Suppose we count by person stages only. If I ask, 'How many persons are in that room', Lewis's theory will give the answer 'One', on the grounds that there is only one person stage in the room at that time. Suppose, though, that I then ask the perfectly ordinary question, 'How many persons have been in that room *in the last hour*?' Will Lewis's theory allow him to answer 'One' to this question?

Lewis says that we should count by person stages. Over the course of an hour, though – in fact, over the course of any period of time of any length – there will exist a very large or infinite number of person stages in the one body. So counting by person stages is no better in this regard than counting by persons.

Suppose Lewis replied that in addition to temporally unex-tended person stages, we should suppose that there are person stages of longer lengths as well (made up of temporally shorter person stages). If so, there can be person stages that exist for an hour. Only one such person stage will have existed in the room for the last hour. Lewis could then say that we should count in

terms of such longer person stages. The length of person stage we should choose to count by should be the one that provides the smallest answer.

However, this move (presuming it is even legitimate to talk in terms of such extended person stages) just brings out a deeper problem with Lewis's theory. Suppose that at some point $t_1$ during this hour, 'Methuselah' has his 137th birthday. At $t_1$ the original 'Methuselah' (who we can call 'Meth$_1$') goes out of existence, because there is no longer any connectedness between the person stage in Methuselah now and Meth$_1$ at the start of his life. So how many people existed during this hour? It is not clear whether Lewis would want to answer 'One' or 'Two'. But that is not the problem Lewis faces. The problem is, rather, that neither answer is open to him.

He cannot say 'Two', because counting by the longest person stage that existed during this hour gives us the answer 'One'. There are no grounds for Lewis to say that there were two distinct person stages here, rather than one hour-long person stage. For example, suppose he were to say that we should take it that there existed two distinct stages during this hour, on the grounds that during this hour connectedness 'ran out' for one such stage. He cannot say this, though, because at every point in time after $t_1$ there will be a 137-year-old stage of Methuselah who ceases to exist because connectedness runs out, and so this reasoning will therefore force Lewis to say that an infinite amount of person stages existed during the hour.

So he cannot answer 'Two'. What if he answers 'One'? This will make his position inconsistent, though. Suppose we ask at the end of every hour of 'Methuselah's' life, 'How many people existed in that last hour?' According to this position, the answer would at every stage be 'One'. But suppose that we also asked, 'How many people existed in that last hour?' at the end of every half hour of Methuselah's life. Lewis must also answer 'One' at every stage here. But this overlapping will logically entail that only one person exists over the whole of 'Methuselah's' life, despite the fact that 'Methuselah' was not connected over the whole of his life.

This can be shown as follows. The fact that, for every hour of Methuselah's life, one person existed in that hour, does not itself entail that the same person existed over the whole of Methuselah's life, for it could be that a different person came into existence on the hour every hour. But the possibility that a different person came into existence on the hour every hour is ruled out

by the answer to our second question. No-one went out of existence on the hour, and no-one came into existence on the hour, because the answer to our second question reveals that only one person existed from every half hour to every half hour, and that time period includes the hour.

So, unless Lewis wants us to abandon basic arithmetic and logic when it comes to persons, it follows that only one person existed over the whole of Methuselah's life. But this contradicts the basic claim of Lewis's psychological theory that connectedness is necessary for personal identity, and it also contradicts Lewis's claim that there is more than one person associated with Methuselah's body over the 969 years.

## 6. Which person are you?

Suppose that 'you' are 'Methuselah', and we label all the different continuant persons that exist in Methuselah, 'Meth$_1$', 'Meth$_2$', 'Meth$_3$' and so on. Suppose that after a few hundred years you ask yourself the question, 'Who am I? Am I, say, Meth$_{1000}$? Or am I, say, Meth$_{2000}$? Or am I one of the other Methuselahs?'

It cannot be answered that you are the person stage that exists at the current point in time, for you are a person, and no person stage (unextended or not) is a person. So you must be one of the continuant persons that have the current person stage as a stage. But which person? Are you all of them? Or one of them? Or none of them?

Lewis has discussed an objection similar to this one in relation to his claim that both fission products exist before the fission. Adapting his claims there to the case we are dealing with here, his view seems to be this:

> The 'I' in your thought cannot really refer to just one person in such a case. It is an 'improper description' (1983b, 75). To make sense of it, we should take it as referring to all of those persons that the current stage is a stage of.

This, however, leads to absurdity in the Methuselah case. What if someone says, 'How many years have you existed for?' What is the correct answer for you to give? And who are 'you'? On Lewis's view, there is no unique 'you' existing in this case. Should 'you' say, 'It depends on who you're talking to. If you are talking to Meth$_{1112}$, he is [say] 90. If you are talking to Meth$_{4127}$,

he is [say] 45. If you are talking to $Meth_{8967}$, he is 13', and so on.[1]

If the questioner says, 'But what about *you*? Which one are you?' What are 'you' supposed to reply to this? 'You' cannot say that you are only one of the Methuselahs, because that entails that you are not any of the other Methuselahs, which cannot be right, because you have just as much reason to be any of the other (relevant) Methuselahs as that Methuselah. And you cannot say that you are none of them, because that means that you are not a person and so do not exist (given that you are not a person stage). And you cannot say that you are all of the relevant Methuselahs, because that does not make any sense – you cannot be an enormously large or infinite number of distinct people. Nor can you say that there has only ever been one person existing in 'Methuselah's' body, namely you, because that directly contradicts Lewis's connectedness view, as connectedness has not held over the whole period of 'Methuselah's' life.

So according to Lewis's view, we cannot suppose that there is any unique 'you' who exists here. Is this the explanation of the situation, though, or the reason why his view makes no sense? It seems to me the latter. On Lewis's view, 'Methuselah's' thought, 'I am one person only, and I have lived for such-and-such years', is mistaken. At any particular time when 'Methuselah' is thinking, what is in fact going on is that the thought in question is had by an infinite number of people. There is no unique 'you' who has this thought. I think this is clearly unacceptable, and that Lewis's position must therefore be rejected.

Besides, this claim of Lewis's seems to undermine his earlier claim that there is no problem of 'overpopulation'. Lewis said that we should count by person stages, rather than by persons, so that if he looked into a room and saw you sitting by yourself, he could say, 'There is one person in this room'. However, it is now revealed that he could also say to you

> There is no unique 'you' in your body, and in talking to 'you' I am talking to an infinite number of distinct people, and whatever thoughts 'you' have now really belong to an infinite number of distinct people.

If this is true, then his suggestion that we do, or should, count by person stages seems rather hollow.

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[1]  Of course, these '$Meth_n$' figures are completely out, but let us ignore that for now (it isn't my problem anyway).

The problem with Lewis's view is that it only seems to have any plausibility if we slide into thinking of ourselves as person stages at the convenient moments. But we are persons, not person stages. Lewis himself agrees that this is so, as he takes persons to be four-dimensional entities. He says, for instance, that '[a] continuant person is an aggregate of person stages' (1976, 22).[2] But if persons are four-dimensional aggregates of stages, then his view collapses into absurdity. It entails that if 'you' live long enough, there will be an infinite number of numerically distinct persons associated with your body, and if you ever ask yourself which person you are, there is no way of working out the answer. If 'you' ask yourself, on the 300th birthday of your body, 'Am I just starting my life, or just ending it?', there will be no answer that can be given.

### 7.  What matters in survival?

A defender of the connectedness view might argue that we should not be concerned with which person we are, because what matters is R-relatedness, not identity. Lewis himself cannot make this reply, as he argues that R-relatedness and identity (i.e., the I-relation) always coincide. But let us suppose that we are dealing with a connectedness theorist who does not accept Lewis's view on this matter. Will this theorist be able to avoid my objections by claiming that what matters in survival is not identity, but R-relatedness?

No. We are concerned with what matters in survival to us, not to anything else. As we are persons, this concern is therefore a concern with what matters in survival to persons, not to person stages. And if there is no way of deciding which person you are to start with, there is no way of even beginning to talk about what matters to you in survival, even if this is in fact something other than your own continued existence. (Parfit at least was able to say that what matters in survival to you is not necessarily your own continued existence, because he was able to identify you as a person to start with.)

It might then be claimed by this (non-Lewisian) connectedness theorist that we *should* think of ourselves as person stages. Such a theorist might hold that we will not exist in the future, but this does not matter, as identity is not what matters in survival. What matters in survival is R-relatedness, and we will have what matters

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[2]  Lewis makes similar claims throughout the rest of this paper. See also Lewis 1971.

in survival if there are future person stages that are R-related to us now. However, any such theory would be an extremely radical and counter-intuitive one, and the onus is on the stage theorist to present and defend any such theory. A proper investigation of such a view cannot be undertaken here.[3]

In conclusion, then, I maintain that the psychological theorist cannot hold that psychological connectedness is necessary to what matters in survival (whether this is identity and/or relation R), and that Lewis's version of the connectedness view only seemed plausible because he was ambiguous about whether persons are stages or four-dimensional aggregates of stages.[4]

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[3]  Theodore Sider has argued that we are person stages (1996). He also argues that a stage at $t_1$ can be said to exist in the future at $t_2$ if some stage that is R-related to it exists at $t_2$, even though the stage at $t_2$ is not numerically identical to the stage at $t_1$. I do not think his arguments are convincing, though I cannot argue that here.