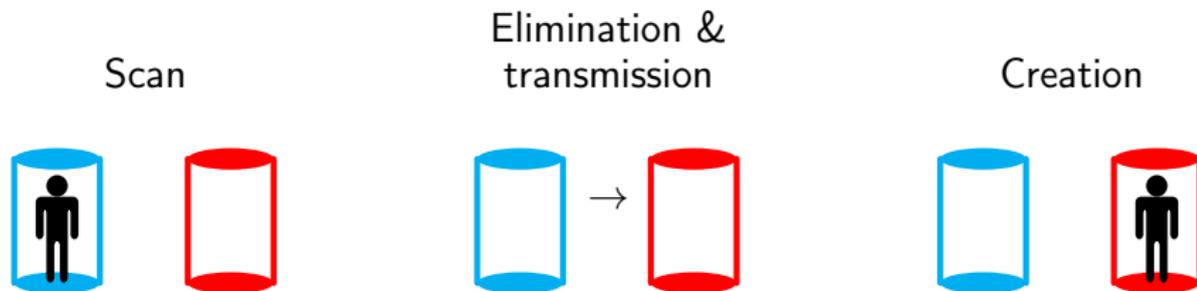


# The Phenomenal-Continuity Account of Personal Identity

Johan E. Gustafsson

# Bernard Williams's First Case

Williams's (1970) first type of case involves brain-state transfer with no physical continuity. An example of this type of case is Parfit's teletransportation case.



In this type of case, some people think that one can survive teletransportation, which suggests that physical continuity is not necessary for personal identity.

## Bernard Williams's Second Case

Williams's second type of case in Parfit's (1984, p. 229) rendition:

*I am the prisoner of some callous neuro-surgeon, who intends to disrupt my psychological continuity by tampering with my brain. I shall be conscious while he operates, and in pain. The surgeon tells me that, while I am in pain, he will do several things. He will first activate some neurodes that will give me amnesia. I shall suddenly lose all of my memories of my life up to the start of my pain. The surgeon next tells me that, while I am still in pain, he will later flip another switch, that will cause me to believe that I am Napoleon, and will give me apparent memories of Napoleon's life. Can I assume that this will cause my pain to cease?*

In this type of case it seems to many that one does survive. Hence psychological continuity does not seem to be necessary for personal identity.

So neither psychological continuity nor physical continuity is both necessary and sufficient for personal identity.

These seemingly conflicting reactions to the various thought-experiments, might make one worried about the reliability of our reactions to them.

Tamar Szabó Gendler (1998, p. 604):

*We may well feel that a scenario is perfectly coherent, without knowing what we would do or say were we to encounter it. In such circumstances, our evaluation of the case is likely to depend on how the case is presented*

The basic idea of the phenomenal approach to personal identity is that the conflicting results in these cases are due to these cases being underdescribed.

All but one of these cases leave out any mention of the stream of consciousness of the people involved.

Perhaps a consciousness-based continuity could account for our intuitions.

John Locke (1694 / 1979, II.xxvii.17):

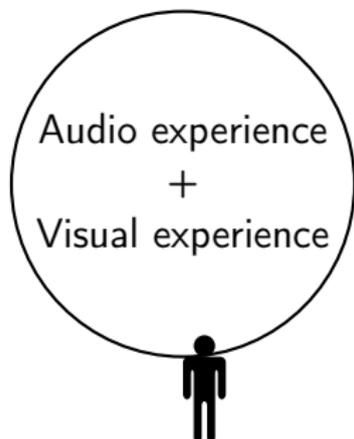
*That with which the consciousness of this present thinking thing can join itself, makes the same Person, and is one self with it, and with nothing else; and so attributes to it self and owns all the actions of that thing, as its own, as far as that consciousness reaches, and no farther; as every one who reflects will perceive.*

## Synchronic phenomenal connectedness

Two simultaneous experiences are phenomenally connected if and only if they are experienced together.

Experiences that are experienced together are co-conscious, that is, they are part of one unified conscious state.

An example of experienced togetherness could be the experience of hearing me talk and the experience of reading this slide. These experiences do not occur on their own; they occur together in your present consciousness.



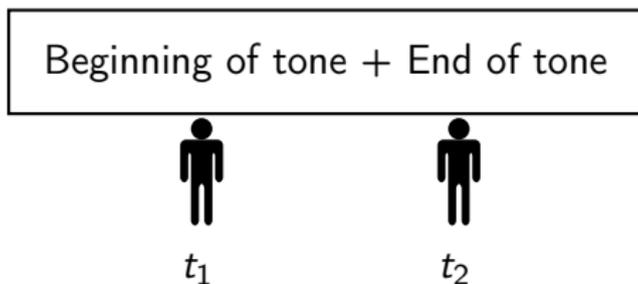
## Diachronic Phenomenal Connectedness

Phenomenal connectedness over time might be a little more tricky. The idea is that we do not experience things in discrete experiential atoms.

In a typical stream of consciousness each experienced moment is experienced as flowing into the next.

Dainton gives the examples of what it is like to suffer a prolonged toothache, or to hear an extended tone played on a flute.

Diachronic phenomenal connectedness is this type experienced togetherness over time.



# Phenomenal Continuity

Just like how we defined psychological continuity in terms of overlapping sequences of psychological connectedness, we define phenomenal continuity as follows:

*Phenomenal continuity* is the holding of temporally ordered overlapping chains of phenomenal connectedness.

# Streams of Consciousness

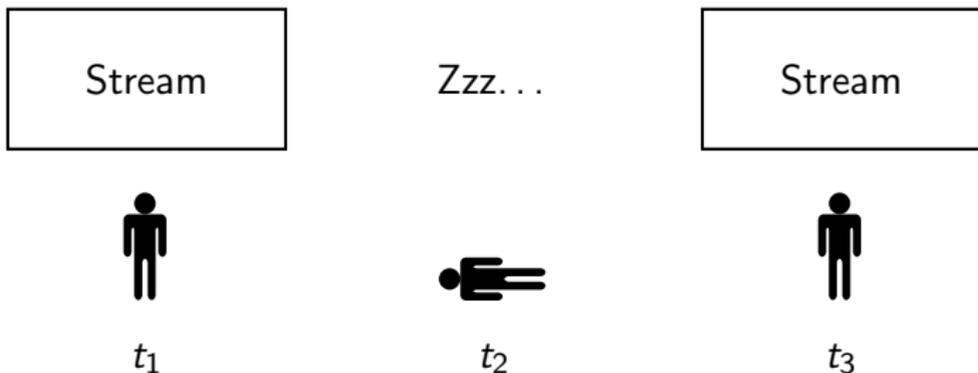
*A stream of consciousness* is a set of experiences such that all simultaneous experiences are phenomenally connected and all non-simultaneous experiences are phenomenally continuous.

### *The Inseparability Thesis*

Self and phenomenal continuity cannot come apart: all the experiences in a single (non-branching) stream of consciousness are co-personal.

### *The Phenomenal-Continuity Criterion of Personal Identity*

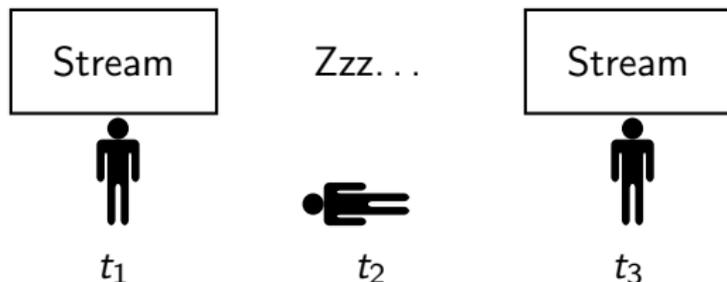
If  $P_1$  is conscious at  $t_1$  and  $P_2$  is conscious at  $t_2$  then  $P_1$  is identical to  $P_2$  if and only if there is (non-branching) phenomenal continuity or connectedness between the conscious states of  $P_1$  at  $t_1$  and the conscious states of  $P_2$  at  $t_2$ .



# The Bridge Problem

At least one of the following is false:

- (a) If a person  $P_1$  is conscious at time  $t_1$  and a person  $P_3$  is conscious at time  $t_3$  then  $P_1$  is identical to  $P_3$  only if there exists a (non-branching) stream of consciousness  $S$  such that  $P_1$  partakes of  $S$  at  $t_1$  and  $P_3$  partakes of  $S$  at  $t_3$ .
- (b) Two experiences separated by dreamless sleep cannot be phenomenally connected nor continuous and can therefore not be part of the same stream of consciousness.
- (c) A person  $P_1$  who is awake at time  $t_1$  and falls to dreamless sleep at time  $t_2$  can be identical to a person  $P_2$  that wakes up at time  $t_3$  where  $t_1 < t_2 < t_3$ .



Because of the bridge problem, Dainton rejects that phenomenal continuity is necessary for personal identity.

According to Dainton, a self is not a stream of consciousness but instead a collection of capacities for stream-like consciousness.

The basic idea is that, while we are in deep sleep, we still have the capacity to have conscious experiences.

To state Dainton and Bayne's proposal we need some new terminology.

An *experience producer* is any object or system which is capable of generating experience, of one or more specified kinds, when appropriately stimulated, by virtue of the laws of nature.

An example of an experience producer is your brain. Basically, experience producers are co-personal if they would have produced phenomenally continuous experiences if they had been continuously producing experiences.

So you are now the same person as you were during your last dreamless sleep, because had you stayed awake, your brain would have produced experiences that would have been phenomenally continuous experiences with your present experiences.

## Objection to Dainton

Tim Bayne (2010, p. 288):

*[T]here is no a priori guarantee that a single consciousness-generating mechanism will produce only one stream of consciousness at a time.*

Another approach—see Gustafsson (2011)—would be to challenge claim (b) of the bridge problem, that is, the claim that:

- (b) Two experiences separated by dreamless sleep cannot be phenomenally connected nor continuous and can therefore not be part of the same stream of consciousness.

That experiences that are separated by dreamless sleep cannot be part of the same stream of consciousness is usually just taken for granted.

Dainton (2004, pp. 379–380) writes:

*It seems that most people lose consciousness completely at least once every twenty four hours, when they slide off into dreamless sleep. If this is right, then a typical person can expect to have several thousand distinct streams of consciousness during the course of their life.*

The key idea is that phenomenal continuity is distinct from, and can hold without, physical and psychological continuity.

So the physical discontinuity in that some time has passed from the last experience before the gap to the first experience after the gap need not be a problem.

Likewise, the psychological discontinuity in that we no longer remember when we wake up the thoughts we had when we fell asleep need not be a problem.

All we need is there to be phenomenal connectedness between the last experience before the gap and the first experience after the gap.

One might wonder how there could be any experienced togetherness across a gap, since a temporally scattered experience seems implausible.

But we need not claim that there is one unified experience including both the experience before the gap and the one after the gap.

Dainton (2008, p. 48) writes:

*When two experiences are co-conscious they are experienced together, but this togetherness is not a product of a third experience which comes between the two, it is a direct (unmediated, experientially speaking) relationship between the two experiences themselves.*

William James (1890 / 1981, p. 198):

*We often take ether and have operations performed without a suspicion that our consciousness has suffered a breach. The two ends join each other smoothly over the gap; and only the sight of our wound assures us that we must have been living through a time which for our immediate consciousness was non-existent. Even in sleep this sometimes happens: We think we have had no nap, and it takes the clock to assure us that we are wrong. We thus may live through a real outward time, a time known by the psychologist who studies us, and yet not feel the time, or infer it from any inward sign.*

James (1890 / 1981, p. 231):

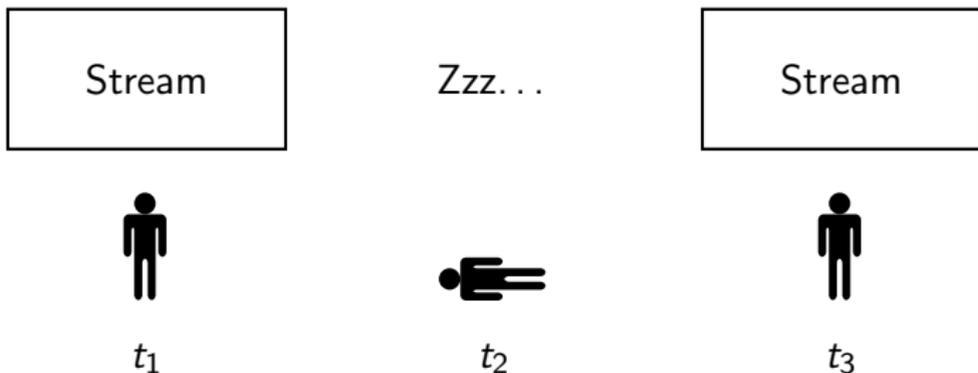
*In the unconsciousness produced by nitrous oxide and other anæsthetics, in that of epilepsy and fainting, the broken edges of the sentient life may meet and merge over the gap, much as the feelings of space of the opposite margins of the 'blind spot' meet and merge over that objective interruption to the sensitiveness of the eye. Such consciousness as this, whatever it be for the onlooking psychologist, is for itself unbroken. It feels unbroken; . . .*

A plausible explanation of what makes experiences at different times phenomenally connected:

An experience produced by a brain  $B$  has diachronic phenomenal connectedness to the temporally most immediate experiences produced by  $B$ .

### *The Phenomenal-Continuity Criterion of Personal Identity*

If  $P_1$  is conscious at  $t_1$  and  $P_2$  is conscious at  $t_2$  then  $P_1$  is identical to  $P_2$  if and only if there is (non-branching) phenomenal continuity or connectedness between the conscious states of  $P_1$  at  $t_1$  and the conscious states of  $P_2$  at  $t_2$ .



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