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Psychological, Biological, And Hybrid Accounts Of Personal Identity: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This paper provides an academic overview of the debate on personal identity, focusing on three main approaches: the Psychological, Biological, and Hybrid theories. It examines the Psychological Approach, which grounds identity in psychological continuity such as memory and consciousness, illustrated by the Transplant Intuition. The Biological Approach argues for identity based on the persistence of the human organism, challenging psychological criteria and rejecting the Transplant Intuition. The paper discusses key objections to the Biological Approach, including its counterintuitive implications and methodological concerns. The Hybrid Approach is presented as a middle ground, integrating both biological and psychological elements, though it faces unresolved questions about their interaction. The paper also addresses the "Too Many Minds" objection, which challenges non-biological accounts by highlighting problems with overlapping identities. The conclusion emphasizes the complexity of personal identity, noting that purely biological continuity fails to fully capture what matters for survival, and calls for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between persons and human animals.

Keywords: Personal Identity, Psychological Approach Psychological Continuity, Consciousness, Biological Continuity, Identity Persistence

Question -

1. How do the Psychological, Biological, and Hybrid Approaches differ in their criteria for personal identity, and what are the main philosophical challenges each approach faces?
2. In what ways does the Too Many Minds Objection challenge non-biological accounts of personal identity, and how might this objection influence the development of hybrid theories?

Persons, Animals, and Identity:

The nature of personal identity remains a central concern in contemporary metaphysics. Philosophers disagree on whether a person's persistence over time depends primarily on psychological continuity or biological facts about human organisms. This article offers an overview of three leading positions—the psychological, biological, and hybrid approaches—while highlighting the major arguments and objections presented by authors such as Olson (1997), Snowdon (1991), and Parfit (1984).

The Psychological Approach

According to the Psychological Approach, personal identity is grounded in psychological continuity: memory, consciousness, character, and other mental connections (Locke 1694/1975). From this perspective, if a person's cerebrum were transplanted into another body, carrying their mental features, the resulting individual would be the same as the donor.

This judgement—commonly known as the *Transplant Intuition*—has shaped discussions of personal identity for centuries. This suggests that identity cannot be reduced to the continuity of a biological organism (Parfit 1984; Shoemaker 1999).

The Biological Approach

The Biological Approach, defended prominently by Olson (1997), Van Inwagen (1990), and Snowdon (1991), argues that we are fundamentally human animals. As animals, our persistence conditions are more biological than psychological. On this account, we existed as fetuses before acquiring psychological capacities, and we may continue to exist even if we lose these capacities due to permanent brain damage (Olson 1997). Thus, psychological continuity is **neither necessary nor sufficient** for the continued existence of a human. The Biological Approach therefore rejects the Transplant Intuition, claiming either that the intuition is mistaken (Snowdon 1991) or that it confuses practical concerns with literal identity (Olson 1997).

Difficulties for the Biological Approach

Several challenges confront defenders of the Biological Approach.

First, rejecting the Transplant Intuition requires dismissing a deeply entrenched and widely shared response to standard philosophical thought experiments (Baker 2000). Because thought experiments are central to conceptual analysis, denying their results threatens to undermine the methodology used in much of philosophy. Second, the Biological Approach yields counterintuitive implications. Olson (1997) argues that if the brainstem is gradually replaced while consciousness persists, the resulting conscious being is not identical to the original person. Many philosophers find these conclusions implausible.

Third, Olson's attempt to explain away the Transplant Intuition by appealing to Parfit's (1984) claim that identity "is not what matters" requires adopting the controversial rejection of the only x-and-y principle. This principle states that identity facts depend solely on the intrinsic relations between earlier and later entities. Rejecting it creates additional theoretical burdens, including acceptance of "best-candidate" conditions for identity—conditions that biological theorists themselves may find unattractive.

The Hybrid Approach

In response to these challenges, some philosophers have advanced a Hybrid Approach that incorporates elements of both biological and psychological theories (Wiggins 1996; McDowell 1997; Parfit, unpublished). The Hybrid Approach maintains that we are animals, yet acknowledges that psychological continuity sometimes determines personal identity—particularly in cerebrum-transplant cases.

Arguments for the Hybrid Approach come from several directions. Parfit's "Mekon" example suggests that the seat of consciousness, rather than mere bodily continuity, best tracks our identity judgements. Brain-in-a-vat and gradual-replacement cases likewise show that purely biological criteria can fail to align with ordinary assessments of survival (Olson 1997; Shoemaker 1999). Similar intuitions arise in nonhuman cases: if a dog's cerebrum were transplanted, many would judge that the original dog continues where its cerebrum goes,

regardless of bodily continuity.

Although the Hybrid Approach softens the conflict between psychological and biological theories, it remains incomplete. It must explain how biological and psychological continuities interact when they diverge and whether identity should follow one or the other in contested cases.

The “Too Many Minds” Objection

A significant obstacle to rejecting biological identity is the *Too Many Minds* Objection (Shoemaker 1999). If people are not identical to the animals they coincide with, then multiple thinking beings occupy the same physical space: the psychological person and the human animal. Because both share the same brain, behaviour, and sensory inputs, it becomes unclear why only one of them should be counted as the genuine thinker. This consequence is generally regarded as unacceptable and continues to pose a major challenge for non-biological accounts.

Conclusion

The debate between psychological, biological, and hybrid theories illustrates the complexity of analyzing personal identity. The Psychological Approach captures the intuitive appeal of Transplant Intuition, while the Biological Approach emphasizes our nature as living organisms. The Hybrid Approach attempts to reconcile these insights, but questions remain regarding how biological and psychological conditions should be weighed. Ultimately, the discussion reveals that no view that allows bare biological continuity to be sufficient for personal identity can fully preserve the close connection between literal identity and what matters for survival. Therefore, the challenge is to understand how people relate to the human animals with which they appear to be intimately but not straightforwardly identical.

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