

The Shattered Identity

By Sam Vaknin

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I. Exposition

In the movie "Shattered" (1991), Dan Merrick survives an accident and develops total amnesia regarding his past. His battered face is reconstructed by plastic surgeons and, with the help of his loving wife, he gradually recovers his will to live. But he never develops a proper sense of identity. It is as though he is constantly ill at ease in his own body. As the plot unravels, Dan is led to believe that he may have murdered his wife's lover, Jack. This thriller offers additional twists and turns but, throughout it all, we face this question:

Dan has no recollection of being Dan. Dan does not remember murdering Jack. It seems as though Dan's very identity has been erased. Yet, Dan is in sound mind and can tell right from wrong. Should Dan be held (morally and, as a result, perhaps legally as well) accountable for Jack's murder?

Would the answer to this question still be the same had Dan erased from his memory ONLY the crime -but recalled everything else (in an act of selective dissociation)? Do our moral and legal accountability and responsibility spring from the integrity of our memories? If Dan were to be punished for a crime he doesn't have the faintest recollection of committing - wouldn't he feel horribly wronged? Wouldn't he be justified in feeling so?

There are many states of consciousness that involve dissociation and selective amnesia: hypnosis, trance and possession, hallucination, illusion, memory disorders (like organic, or functional amnesia), depersonalization disorder, dissociative fugue, dreaming, psychosis, post traumatic stress disorder, and drug-induced psychotomimetic states.

Consider this, for instance:

What if Dan were the victim of a Multiple Personality Disorder (now known as "Dissociative Identity Disorder")? What if one of his "alters" (i.e., one of the multitude of "identities" sharing Dan's mind and body) committed the crime? Should Dan still be held responsible? What if the alter "John" committed the crime and then "vanished", leaving behind another alter (let us say, "Joseph") in control? Should "Joseph" be held responsible for the crime "John" committed? What if "John" were to reappear 10 years

after he "vanished"? What if he were to reappear 50 years after he "vanished"? What if he were to reappear for a period of 90 days - only to "vanish" again? And what is Dan's role in all this? Who, exactly, then, is Dan?

II. Who is Dan?

Buddhism compares Man to a river. Both retain their identity despite the fact that their individual composition is different at different moments. The possession of a body as the foundation of a self-identity is a dubious proposition. Bodies change drastically in time (consider a baby compared to an adult). Almost all the cells in a human body are replaced every few years. Changing one's brain (by transplantation) - also changes one's identity, even if the rest of the body remains the same.

Thus, the only thing that binds a "person" together (i.e., gives him a self and an identity) is time, or, more precisely, memory. By "memory" I also mean: personality, skills, habits, retrospected emotions - in short: all long term imprints and behavioural patterns. The body is not an accidental and insignificant container, of course. It constitutes an important part of one's self-image, self-esteem, sense of self-worth, and sense of existence (spatial, temporal, and social). But one can easily imagine a brain in vitro as having the same identity as when it resided in a body. One cannot imagine a body without a brain (or with a different brain) as having the same identity it had before the brain was removed or replaced.

What if the brain in vitro (in the above example) could not communicate with us at all? Would we still think it is possessed of a self? The biological functions of people in coma are maintained. But do they have an identity, a self? If yes, why do we "pull the plug" on them so often?

It would seem (as it did to Locke) that we accept that someone has a self-identity if: (a) He has the same hardware as we do (notably, a brain) and (b) He communicates his humanly recognizable and comprehensible inner world to us and manipulates his environment. We accept that he has a given (i.e., the same continuous) self-identity if (c) He shows consistent intentional (i.e., willed) patterns ("memory") in doing (b) for a long period of time.

It seems that we accept that we have a self-identity (i.e., we are self-conscious) if (a) We discern (usually through introspection) long term consistent intentional (i.e., willed) patterns ("memory") in our manipulation ("relating to") of our environment and (b) Others accept that we have a self-identity (Herbert Mead, Feuerbach).

Dan (probably) has the same hardware as we do (a brain). He communicates his (humanly recognizable and comprehensible) inner world to us (which is how he manipulates us and his environment). Thus, Dan clearly has a self-identity. But he is inconsistent. His intentional (willed) patterns, his memory, are incompatible with those demonstrated by Dan before the accident. Though he clearly is possessed of a self-identity, we cannot say that he has the SAME self-identity he possessed before the crash. In other words, we cannot say that he, indeed, is Dan.

Dan himself does not feel that he has a self-identity at all. He discerns intentional

(willed) patterns in his manipulation of his environment but, due to his amnesia, he cannot tell if these are consistent, or long term. In other words, Dan has no memory. Moreover, others do not accept him as Dan (or have their doubts) because they have no memory of Dan as he is now.

Interim conclusion:

Having a memory is a necessary and sufficient condition for possessing a self-identity.

III. Repression

Yet, resorting to memory to define identity may appear to be a circular (even tautological) argument. When we postulate memory - don't we already presuppose the existence of a "remembering agent" with an established self-identity?

Moreover, we keep talking about "discerning", "intentional", or "willed" patterns. But isn't a big part of our self (in the form of the unconscious, full of repressed memories) unavailable to us? Don't we develop defence mechanisms against repressed memories and fantasies, against unconscious content incongruent with our self-image? Even worse, this hidden, inaccessible, dynamically active part of our self is thought responsible for our recurrent discernible patterns of behaviour. The phenomenon of posthypnotic suggestion seems to indicate that this may be the case. The existence of a self-identity is, therefore, determined through introspection (by oneself) and observation (by others) of merely the conscious part of the self.

But the unconscious is as much a part of one's self-identity as one's conscious. What if, due to a mishap, the roles were reversed? What if Dan's conscious part were to become his unconscious and his unconscious part - his conscious? What if all his conscious memories, drives, fears, wishes, fantasies, and hopes - were to become unconscious while his repressed memories, drives, etc. - were to become conscious? Would we still say that it is "the same" Dan and that he retains his self-identity? Not very likely. And yet, one's (unremembered) unconscious - for instance, the conflict between id and ego - determines one's personality and self-identity.

The main contribution of psychoanalysis and later psychodynamic schools is the understanding that self-identity is a dynamic, evolving, ever-changing construct - and not a static, inertial, and passive entity. It casts doubt over the meaningfulness of the question with which we ended the exposition: "Who, exactly, then, is Dan?" Dan is different at different stages of his life (Erikson) and he constantly evolves in accordance with his innate nature (Jung), past history (Adler), drives (Freud), cultural milieu (Horney), upbringing (Klein, Winnicott), needs (Murray), or the interplay with his genetic makeup. Dan is not a thing - he is a process. Even Dan's personality traits and cognitive style, which may well be stable, are often influenced by Dan's social setting and by his social interactions.

It would seem that having a memory is a necessary but insufficient condition for possessing a self-identity. One cannot remember one's unconscious states (though one can remember their outcomes). One often forgets events, names, and other information even if it was conscious at a given time in one's past. Yet, one's (unremembered)

unconscious is an integral and important part of one's identity and one's self. The remembered as well as the unremembered constitute one's self-identity.

IV. The Memory Link

Hume said that to be considered in possession of a mind, a creature needs to have a few states of consciousness linked by memory in a kind of narrative or personal mythology. Can this conjecture be equally applied to unconscious mental states (e.g. subliminal perceptions, beliefs, drives, emotions, desires, etc.)?

In other words, can we rephrase Hume and say that to be considered in possession of a mind, a creature needs to have a few states of consciousness and a few states of the unconscious - all linked by memory into a personal narrative? Isn't it a contradiction in terms to remember the unconscious?

The unconscious and the subliminal are instance of the general category of mental phenomena which are not states of consciousness (i.e., are not conscious). Sleep and hypnosis are two others. But so are "background mental phenomena" - e.g., one holds onto one's beliefs and knowledge even when one is not aware (conscious) of them at every given moment. We know that an apple will fall towards the earth, we know how to drive a car ("automatically"), and we believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, even though we do not spend every second of our waking life consciously thinking about falling apples, driving cars, or the position of the sun.

Yet, the fact that knowledge and beliefs and other background mental phenomena are not constantly conscious - does not mean that they cannot be remembered. They can be remembered either by an act of will, or in (sometimes an involuntary) response to changes in the environment. The same applies to all other unconscious content. Unconscious content can be recalled. Psychoanalysis, for instance, is about re-introducing repressed unconscious content to the patient's conscious memory and thus making it "remembered".

In fact, one's self-identity may be such a background mental phenomenon (always there, not always conscious, not always remembered). The acts of will which bring it to the surface are what we call "memory" and "introspection".

This would seem to imply that having a self-identity is independent of having a memory (or the ability to introspect). Memory is just the mechanism by which one becomes aware of one's background, "always-on", and omnipresent (all-pervasive) self-identity. Self-identity is the object and predicate of memory and introspection. It is as though self-identity were an emergent extensive parameter of the complex human system - measurable by the dual techniques of memory and introspection.

We, therefore, have to modify our previous conclusions:

Having a memory is not a necessary nor a sufficient condition for possessing a self-identity.

We are back to square one. The poor souls in Oliver Sacks' tome, "The Man Who

Mistook his Wife for a Hat" are unable to create and retain memories. They occupy an eternal present, with no past. They are thus unable to access (or invoke) their self-identity by remembering it. Their self-identity is unavailable to them (though it is available to those who observe them over many years) - but it exists for sure. Therapy often succeeds in restoring pre-amnesiac memories and self-identity.

V. The Incurrigible Self

Self-identity is not only always-on and all-pervasive - but also incurrigible. In other words, no one - neither an observer, nor the person himself - can "disprove" the existence of his self-identity. No one can prove that a report about the existence of his (or another's) self-identity is mistaken.

Is it equally safe to say that no one - neither an observer, nor the person himself - can prove (or disprove) the non-existence of his self-identity? Would it be correct to say that no one can prove that a report about the non-existence of his (or another's) self-identity is true or false?

Dan's criminal responsibility crucially depends on the answers to these questions. Dan cannot be held responsible for Jack's murder if he can prove that he is ignorant of the facts of his action (i.e., if he can prove the non-existence of his self-identity). If he has no access to his (former) self-identity - he can hardly be expected to be aware and cognizant of these facts.

What is in question is not Dan's mens rea, nor the application of the McNaghten tests (did Dan know the nature and quality of his act or could he tell right from wrong) to determine whether Dan was insane when he committed the crime. A much broader issue is at stake: is it the same person? Is the murderous Dan the same person as the current Dan? Even though Dan seems to own the same body and brain and is manifestly sane - he patently has no access to his (former) self-identity. He has changed so drastically that it is arguable whether he is still the same person - he has been "replaced".

Finally, we can try to unite all the strands of our discourse into this double definition:

It would seem that we accept that someone has a self-identity if: (a) He has the same hardware as we do (notably, a brain) and, by implication, the same software as we do (an all-pervasive, omnipresent self-identity) and (b) He communicates his humanly recognizable and comprehensible inner world to us and manipulates his environment. We accept that he has a specific (i.e., the same continuous) self-identity if (c) He shows consistent intentional (i.e., willed) patterns ("memory") in doing (b) for a long period of time.

It seems that we accept that we have a specific self-identity (i.e., we are self-conscious of a specific identity) if (a) We discern (usually through memory and introspection) long term consistent intentional (i.e., willed) patterns ("memory") in our manipulation ("relating to") of our environment and (b) Others accept that we have a specific self-identity.

In conclusion: Dan undoubtedly has a self-identity (being human and, thus, endowed

with a brain). Equally undoubtedly, this self-identity is not Dan's (but a new, unfamiliar, one).

Such is the stuff of our nightmares - body snatching, demonic possession, waking up in a strange place, not knowing who we are. Without a continuous personal history - we are not. It is what binds our various bodies, states of mind, memories, skills, emotions, and cognitions - into a coherent bundle of identity. Dan speaks, drinks, dances, talks, and makes love - but throughout that time, he is not present because he does not remember Dan and how it is to be Dan. He may have murdered Jake - but, by all philosophical and ethical criteria, it was most definitely not his fault.

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Fighting Identity Theft

By James H. Dimmitt

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Chances are good that you know someone who has been victimized by the fastest growing crime - identity theft. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) reported that there were 10 million cases of identity theft in 2002 alone. It's estimated that someone's identity is stolen every 79 seconds.

The bad news is with increasing amounts of personal information available to an experienced identity thief, it shows few signs of slowing down. The good news is that identity fraud is now a federal crime with stiff penalties for those who perpetrate these crimes.

Here are a few simple steps you can take now to minimize your risk:

- 1) Check your credit report annually, if not more often. Most victims of identity theft don't realize they've been victimized until 14 months after the crime. By then the damage is done and you will spend a significant amount of time and money trying to correct it.
- 2) Keep your Social Security number private. Do not have it printed on your personal checks or drivers license. Do not share it with anyone, including merchants, unless they can provide a good reason for having it. Once someone has your Social Security number they have the key to unlocking your identity and using it fraudulently.
- 3) Shred offers for pre-approved credit cards that you receive by mail. Do the same with any receipts that contain account numbers or your Social Security number. Identity thieves are not afraid to go "dumpster diving" in order to obtain your personal information.

Identity theft has become the fastest growing crime because it is the most profitable crime. On average, the loss from identity theft is about \$18,000.00. Taking these precautions now can you save you from becoming another statistic in the fight against identity theft.

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James H. Dimmitt

James is editor of "TO YOUR CREDIT", a weekly free newsletter. Subscribe to the newsletter by visiting <http://www.yourfreecreditreportnow.com>. He is also author of "Identity Theft - How to Avoid Becoming the Next Victim!" available at

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