

Questions of Identity: Is the Hulk the Same Person as Bruce Banner?

Imagine you're a judge in San Francisco presiding over a criminal trial. Recently the city jolted to a standstill. An awesome force had rampaged through the downtown area damaging automobiles, cable cars, power lines, and the buildings of several city blocks. The defendant in the trial is Bruce Banner, who has been charged with numerous counts of destruction of property. When asked to enter a plea, Bruce Banner's lawyer offers the following defense: "Your honor, the person who perpetrated these acts was a large, greenish hulk of a person. But my client, as you can see, is a smallish, light-skinned man. In short, my client is clearly not the same person as the individual who perpetrated these acts."

Now, when the lawyer says that the Hulk and Bruce Banner are not the "same person," he is not using the term in the colloquial sense in which we might say, "You know, Bob is just not the same person when he doesn't get his morning coffee." No, the lawyer is making the stronger claim that the Hulk and Bruce Banner literally are *not the same individual*. The lawyer continues, "Your honor, my client is merely another victim in all this. Yes, we acknowledge that Bruce Banner was somehow changed into the person of the Hulk, and then somehow re-emerged as himself once again. But the fact remains that when the acts in question were perpetrated, it was the person of the Hulk and not the person of Bruce Banner who was perpetrating them. So, if the prosecuting attorney wants to put someone on trial, let him capture the Hulk and put him on trial! But it's plain to see that my client is simply not the same person as the Hulk."

As the judge, you must now rule on whether Bruce Banner should stand trial. And this means you must rule on whether Bruce Banner and the Hulk are indeed the same person? What criteria will you use to reach your decision?

The search for such criteria has a long history in philosophical circles. Typically, philosophers frame the issue in terms of the "continuity of personal identity over time." Put another way, the question is: What makes you the same person today that you were yesterday, or were ten years ago, or will be ten years from now? If you could answer that question, then you would have the criteria for determining whether the person before you on trial is the same person who weeks earlier went on a rampage through the city.

The Hulk's Bodily Identity

In our day-to-day lives, we generally never question whether Bob, or Sue, or anyone else we know is literally the "same person" today that he or she was yesterday. This is because we tend to equate *personal* identity with *bodily* identity. That is, we see a physical figure that resembles closely the physical figure we saw and talked with yesterday (or ten years ago), and we assume the two physical figures are the same person. Indeed, even in courts of law, bodily identification is typically all we look for in determining personal identity. This much can be learned by watching any old episode of *Perry Mason* or *Matlock*, where something like the following exchange inevitably takes place.

PROSECUTOR: Do you see the person who committed the crime in the courtroom now?

WITNESS (pointing): Yes, he's sitting right over there.

PROSECUTOR: Let the record reflect that the witness has identified the defendant.

If we were to use bodily identification as the way of identifying the person of Bruce Banner, then Bruce Banner would *not* be the same person as the Hulk. After all, the Hulk's body is much larger than Bruce Banner's body. It follows from this that the individual atoms that comprise Bruce Banner's body haven't simply been rearranged to form the body we identify as the Hulk. Rather, there is a widely different number of total atoms in each body. To grasp how widely different this number is, we need only think back to the 1970's TV series where Dr. Banner (in the TV series, oddly enough, *David Banner*) would transform into the person of the Hulk. He would burst every seam in his clothing except, unrealistically, the seam in the seat of his trousers (the one seam in any tight fitting pair of pants that is always the *first* to go).

Because the atoms that comprise the body of the Hulk number many more than those that make up the body of Bruce Banner, the physical constitution of the Hulk clearly differs from the physical constitution of Bruce Banner. On the assumption that bodily identity is the same as personal identity, this would mean that the Hulk is not the same person as Bruce Banner.

But is bodily identity the correct criterion for determining personal identity? On closer analysis the answer seems to be "no". It's true that the atoms of Bruce Banner's body cannot be the same ones that comprise the Hulk's body. Yet we should remember that the atoms of *all* people's bodies change over time. In the course of a year or two, all the cells in each of our bodies will die and be replaced by new ones. Over the course of a mere week, half our red blood cells will regenerate. Yet we retain our personal identity through this process. The actor who played Don Vito Corleone in the movie *The Godfather* may in his later years have contained in his body nearly as many atoms as the Hulk. But he was nonetheless the same person as the star of *On the Waterfront*, a man who at the time of this earlier film was about the size of Bruce Banner—the trim and muscular Marlon Brando. And so, just because Bruce Banner's body at the time of the trial is very different from the Hulk's body during the time of the earlier rampage through the city, it does not automatically follow that Bruce Banner is not the same person as the Hulk.

At this point perhaps we could reasonably seek to salvage the importance of bodily continuity by suggesting that there need only be *some* degree of bodily continuity in order to establish personal identity. An analogy might help make this suggestion clear. Suppose you bought a sailboat and named her the *Stan Lee Schooner*. As the years go by, your boat will need repairs. At various points you'll need new decking, new rigging, a new mainsail, a new keel, and so forth. Eventually, perhaps, if you own it long enough, you'll end up replacing every single part of the boat with new parts. The question then becomes: Is your current boat still the *Stan Lee Schooner*? Our intuitions are probably pretty clear that the answer is "yes". In the clearest sense, you still own the same boat, however refurbished it might be.

Similarly, it can be argued that, as long as there exists some certain degree of physical continuity between bodies over time, these bodies do belong to the same person. Hence, as long as Bruce Banner and the Hulk meet these minimum physical continuity requirements (whatever the correct minimum requirements are), then it might be argued that Bruce Banner and the Hulk are the same person.

Despite any initial plausibility this line of argument might have, on further analysis it leaves us with some unwelcome outcomes. Suppose I were to die tomorrow after having agreed to become an organ donor. Suppose further that the body parts of mine

needed by doctors for medical transplants all go to the same person, whom we'll call "Herb Trimpe". Conceivably (given continued medical advanced), over fifty percent of my body might be used as replacements for Herb's internal organs, his limbs, and so forth. In such a case, the majority of Herb's post-operative body would consist of physical parts that now belong to my body—including perhaps such things as my current fingerprints. Herb's post-operative body would therefore have a greater physical continuity with my body today than with Herb's own body today. But certainly we would not want to say the person who emerges from the operating room is Kevin Kinghorn and not Herb Trimpe. Whatever the merits of my donation, surely my generosity hasn't helped me defeat death—it is Herb who as a result avoids that fate.

Thus, whatever it is that provides continuity of personal identity over time, it is not the continuity of physical cells or atoms. It is perhaps an interesting question just how much physical continuity there is between the body of the Hulk and the body of Bruce Banner. But this question does not serve as an adequate criterion for determining whether the Hulk and Bruce Banner are the same person

The Mental Realm of the Hulk

Aware of some of the problems with trying to reduce personal identity to the physical realm, philosophers have often explored whether the mental realm might be a more promising place to locate personal identity. Following the seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), much of this exploration has involved the role of memory.

Locke defined a person as a "thinking intelligent being, that has reasons and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in a different times and places." For Locke, what is unique to all persons is the ability to be aware through introspection that one is indeed a thinking being. Continuity of personhood over time is secured because you are able—through the use of memory—to reflect on the fact that at earlier times you were aware through introspection that you were a thinking being.

On the surface, this is a very attractive account of personal identity and could help us understand the continuing identities of many famous comic-book characters who undergo radical physical change. A member of the Justice League of America, Jonn J'onzz, a.k.a the Martian Manhunter, is able to shift shape at will and assume many different bodily appearances. And yet he continues to consider himself, in a mentally self-reflective way, the same being both before and after the shifting. We share that belief. The Fantastic Four would seem to offer us four more examples of this same phenomenon. After their exposure to cosmic rays, Reed Richards, Sue Storm, Johnny Storm, and Ben Grimm take on vastly different physical characteristics, and yet their mental continuity is such that there is no question whether, despite those changes, they are the same people who went up in the experimental spacecraft. In each such case, mental continuity seems sufficient for personal identity.

Applying Locke's criteria, should we then view Bruce Banner as the same person as the Hulk? The answer here may depend on how we conceive of the Hulk character. In the early Marvel comic books, the Hulk kept the same mental states and self-awareness as Bruce Banner. It was as though Banner—or at least his mind—was trapped in the body of the Hulk. On this conception of the Hulk, Bruce Banner's transformation into the monstrous creature in no way violates Locke's criteria for continuous, single personhood.

On the other hand, in later comics, as well as in the 1970s TV series and in the 2003 movie, the mental capacities of the Hulk are much more blurry. The Hulk can still recognize friends like Betty Ross, and he feels protective of them. Correspondingly, he can identify who the bad guys are, and he's none too happy with them. Still, we often see the Hulk looking with evident confusion at people and at his surroundings, seemingly trying to make full sense of his environment. His contribution to ongoing discussions is most often rather general, like the non-specific announcement of intention, "Hulk smash!" There appears to be no suggestion in such depictions of the Hulk that his mental states include the memories of Bruce Banner's previous introspective experiences. So, on these later conceptions of the Hulk, Locke's criteria for continuous personhood seem not to be met.

We have looked briefly at whether John Locke's famous mental criteria for continuous personhood can be met in the case of the Hulk and Bruce Banner, and we've arrived at conflicting results. Now we must ask whether these mental criteria are themselves satisfactory. And on close analysis we'll find that there are severe problems with this alternative and otherwise apparently plausible account of what it is to be the same person.

One problem is that Locke's criteria seem far too restrictive. After all, I cannot now recall what my introspective experiences were at the time of my eighth birthday. But surely it does not follow that my personal identity somehow hasn't remained the same.

Another problem with Locke's criteria was identified by the philosopher Thomas Reid (1710-1796), who wrote on the subject of personal identity a century after Locke did. Reid described a scenario that was meant to illustrate the absurd conclusions to which Locke's criteria lead. He has us imagine a person whose life includes the following three events: (1) as a boy, he is flogged for stealing apples; (2) as a young officer in the army, he performs a heroic act; and (3) near the end of his military career, he receives a promotion to general. In Reid's scenario, when the man is a young officer, he is conscious of having been flogged as a boy. And when the man becomes a general, he is conscious of having performed his heroic act as a young officer. However, at this later time of becoming a general he no longer recalls received that flogging as a boy. Reid goes on to point out that, if memory is what provides continuity of identity, then the young officer is the same person as the boy; and the general is the same person as the young officer. By the transitive laws of logic it therefore follows that the general must be the same person as the boy. So far, so good. But Reid then reminds us, "The general's consciousness does not reach so far back as his floggings; therefore, according to Mr. Locke's doctrine, he is not the person who was flogged. Therefore the general is, and at the same time is not, the same person with him who was flogged at school." In short, Reid has shown that Locke's criteria for personal identity involving introspection and memory lead us to absurd and logically contradictory conclusions. So this account of identity can't be right.

Perhaps we could try to save Locke's theory by amending it slightly to avoid the problem raised by Reid. That is, we might insist that Locke was on the right track with respect to the importance of memory. And what is needed is the less stringent requirement that there must be at least *some* continuity within a person's string of introspective experiences. Thus, while I need not now remember my eighth birthday in order to maintain continuity of personal identity between then and now, what is needed is that I remember yesterday, and that yesterday I remember the day before,

and so forth. Locke's amended criteria, then, would be that there exist a chain of memories between my current life now and my life as an eight-year-old.

Admittedly, this amended set of criteria involving memory would avoid the absurd conclusions associated with Reid's illustration. However, there are other scenarios that illustrate problems with even these amended criteria. Suppose that the person in Reid's story suffers from Alzheimer's Disease and that his memories are different from those described by Reid. As a general rule, the man *does* remember his early childhood and being flogged as a boy. However, because Alzheimer's has deprived him of any memories from his adult life, he *does not* remember his heroic act as a young officer. And he may not even remember what happened yesterday. In such a scenario, there is no continuous chain of memories building on one another through time.

In addition, Bruce Banner might get drugged by a bad guy and be so confused for hours that he can't remember much of anything at all, including previous moments of self-awareness. Yet, that doesn't make him a different human being during those hours. He's still Bruce. Something like this actually happened to Spider-Man for a lot longer than just a few hours when Doc Ock attacked him with a powerful device that gave him temporary amnesia about who he was. It took him quite a while to sort it all out, and yet during that time it was the same superhero, Spider-Man, who was undergoing the amnesia. And so even our amended criteria are not immune to counterexamples.

It's difficult to say whether we can further tweak Locke's memory criteria to account for all possible counterexamples. Some modern philosophers have made such attempts. Yet, all appeals to memory as what constitutes personal identity suffer from a final problem. This problem is one of circularity. Suppose someone has a false memory of working as the starring actor in the original *Adventures of Superman* television show in the 1950s. Perhaps the person is senile and, after watching George Reeves in costume on a rerun, somehow confuses television with his own reality. Or perhaps the person is delusional and thinks he actually is George Reeves. Or maybe the person has been hypnotized at a party or has had a dream in which he seemed to experience wearing the cape in front of the cameras. Although it honestly seems to this person that he starred on this show, seeming to remember something is different from actually remembering something. What's the difference? Obviously, in the case of a genuine memory, the experiences we remember having are the experiences we *actually had*.

However, a problem looms in this discussion of false and genuine memories. We have seen that the introspective phenomenon of *seeming* to remember something is not sufficient to establish a genuine memory. What more is needed? Well, we must add the further conditions that the experiences the person seems to remember are experiences that once actually occurred and that those experiences belong *to the same person* who is later having this apparent memory. But now our criteria for identifying personhood have become circular. For memory was supposed to provide the conditions for continuity of personal identity. And now, in order to specify what a genuine memory *is*, we must stipulate that it involves a past event that was experienced by the same, identical person who is now doing the remembering. In sum, the appeal to the mental realm of introspection and memory seems not to provide adequate criteria for determining continuity of personal identity. As the judge in the Bruce Banner trial, you must look elsewhere for adequate criteria.

A Causal Account of the Hulk's Identity

The categories of cause and effect are important in science and philosophy. It could be suggested that personal identity doesn't consist in simple physical or mental continuity, but rather is to be understood in terms of a causal account ranging across both physical and mental characteristics. If the big green (or gray) Hulk body and raging Hulk consciousness both arise causally from the body and mind of Bruce Banner in certain ways, then perhaps that is sufficient to constitute personal identity through such radical change.

We live in a world of natural causes and effects. The young, buff Marlon Brando became a huge corpulent loner through food, drink, drugs and other causes that naturally resulted in the radical changes we all witnessed over time. In fact, human beings generally grow from tiny babies through childhood and into old age by means of certain causal mechanisms involving food, drink, exercise, experience, accident, disease, and many other things. Perhaps the Hulk is the same person as Bruce Banner precisely because the Hulk state of body and mind develops periodically from the normal Banner state of body and mind by means of certain causal mechanisms involving a complex interplay of radiation, danger, and anger. The Hulk is Bruce Banner precisely because it is Banner who "Hulks out" and becomes this monster. Bruce doesn't disappear from existence and get replaced on the same spot with an altogether different being, the Hulk, who then after a time himself disappears and, by some amazing coincidence, is replaced once again by Bruce Banner. Rather, it's just that the same person morphed into different appearances by a complex set of natural, though rare, causal factors.

The problem with such a causal account is that, like the previous theories of personal identity, it allows for strange and counter-intuitive consequences. Suppose that through a complex form of causal interactions—perhaps involving the devices of a mad scientist who attempts to clone Bruce Banner—the body of Bruce were to split into *two* huge rampaging bodies, each with its own consciousness. These new monstrous creatures would both be causally derived from Bruce. And yet, if they are indeed two separate creatures capable of wreaking havoc in two different parts of a city at the same time, it seems obvious that they could not *both* be the one person, Bruce Banner. At this point, it can begin to look as if no account of personal identity can do the job we need it to do without having absurd consequences we know to be false.

Is There No Way to Tell?

Faced with problems associated with attempts to locate personal identity in either the physical or the mental realm, some philosophers have questioned whether there exists such a thing as personal identity. Contemporary philosopher Derek Parfit notes that we sometimes ask questions about whether an evolving nation or a recently repaired machine is the "same" nation or machine as in previous times. And Parfit observes, "No one thinks that in these cases the questions 'Is it the same nation?' or 'Is it the same machine?' must have answers." Parfit's point is that perhaps it is a mistake to assume there must be a correct answer to questions involving something's (or someone's) identity.

To illustrate his point, Parfit calls attention to a number of science-fiction-like scenarios that are not too different from the cloning example mentioned in the previous section. In one of Parfit's scenarios, he has us imagine a case where "my brain is divided, and each half is housed in a new body." Given medical discoveries that self-consciousness can arise when only half of a human's brain is left intact, it is possible in Parfit's example that both halves of his brain will form centers of self-

consciousness. And each of them may experience some strong form of continuity with the state of consciousness associated with the brain before its bifurcation. Parfit then asks, “What happens to me?” He notes that there is no obvious answer to this question. His own conclusion is that it is most plausible to “suggest that I survive as two different people without implying that I am these people.”

If Parfit is right that it’s a mistake to think that people must always have a single, continuous identity over time, then should we abandon our search for a criterion for personal identity? We shouldn’t, I think, be too quick to do so. After all, most of us intuitively believe that there *is* an answer to the question of whether I would be the same person if I had only half my brain, or if part of my brain was somehow transplanted into another body. We may not *know* what the answers are in difficult situations like the one Parfit describes. But this does not mean that there *aren’t* ultimately answers to these questions. Just because the truth is difficult to find doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. It may be difficult to find a fan of the recent Hulk movie among long-time Hulk comic-book aficionados, but nonetheless there may be a few out there.

The Hulk’s Relational Identity

If we are to defend our intuition that there must be correct answers to questions of personal identity—including the identity of the Hulk and Bruce Banner—and we can’t accept any of the accounts we have looked at so far, there is no reason for despair. There is one final place we might look for adequate criteria of personal identity. In my view, this is also the most promising place to look. We find it in people’s ongoing personal relationships. Starting with the premise that personhood arises through relationships with other people, the suggestion here is that a person has a continuous identity in virtue of maintaining continuous relationships with other people.

At first glance it may seem very odd indeed to claim that your personal identity exists because others relate in some appropriate way to you. Yet, the oddity of this claim arguably stems from our living in a post-Enlightenment, overly individualistic cultural framework that, perhaps mistakenly, seeks to identify people by their private characteristics. When someone around us asks, “Who is Kathryn?” the answer will typically be: “She’s the one who has dark hair, is about 5’6”, likes to read *Hulk* and *X-Men* comics, and is a vegetarian.” These are all in a sense private attributes. And we tend to assume that a compilation of these kinds of private attributes is what makes you “you”.

Though it may initially seem obviously true that your standing as a personal agent *is* indeed a matter of your having such private attributes, perhaps this perception is more a matter of cultural conditioning than the truth of the matter. In ancient and medieval times, your identity as a person was thought of as not so much a matter of your private attributes (for example, what you looked like), but rather more as a matter of the connected set of *relationships* you had with others. It was the nature of your relationships that determined who “you” were.

Granted, you must have certain private attributes—like rationality, self-consciousness, and freedom—in order to be *able* to relate to others. But think for a moment about the attributes that get to the heart of who you are as an enduring person. A person might be loving, generous, faithful, forgiving, and in general self-giving. Or a person might be resentful, stingy, faithless, disloyal, vindictive, and in general self-serving. None of these attributes can be acquired in a vacuum. A person gets these traits in the first place by relating to others in certain specific ways.

There are some uncontroversial examples of relationally constituted entities in our world. A marriage is one of them. A marriage comes into existence and continues through time in virtue of a relationship between two people, as well as in virtue of a larger network of relationships between the couple and an overarching community, and—in the eyes of religious believers—in virtue of even deeper relationships between all of the above and God. On a more naturalistic level, a corporation is a legal entity that exists and continues through time in virtue of a complex network of interacting relationships. So identities based in relationships are not altogether unknown to us in the modern world. Perhaps, in a very deep way, individual personal identity is itself constituted and continued through time in virtue of one or more continuing relationships.

But as philosophers are often quick to point out, there are possible objections that can be raised against any theory. And any relational theory of personal identity is no exception. First, what happens if people fail to relate to you as the same person over time? Does this mean you don't have the same identity over time? You could stop hanging out at the comic shop, stop visiting Internet chat rooms and message boards, change your phone number, move across the country, and sever all your previous relationships with friends, neighbors and co-workers. Would that be the end of you as an individual person and the origin of a literally new person? Surely we don't think so. Second, what about a person who grows up on a deserted island with no other inhabitants to whom she might relate? Does this mean that she doesn't have any identity as a person at all? Third, what if people relate to you through the lens of their own biases and emotional immaturity? Can others impose on you an identity as a person that you in no way choose or endorse? Again, that just seems wrong.

There is one possible philosophical reply to all three objections. It involves positing or recognizing the existence of a God who consistently relates to every person at all times and whose interpersonal knowledge of each person is in no way distorted. Thus, it can be held that there is a God who creates us as persons and guarantees that our personal identities will endure through time and, in addition, that they will finally reflect our true commitments to others, even if during our earthly lives others temporarily distort our identities as persons. Granted, non-theists may not wish to appeal to God in attempting to address the three objections I've mentioned. But this is indeed a straightforward and powerful way of handling all three.

It also pulls back into the picture a causal element, since the God who relationally creates and sustains us in existence through time does so as the Ultimate Cause of our existence. And with God in the picture, the chief objection to the causal picture alone can be answered. The standard understanding of divine power does not see it as ranging over impossibilities. So not even God could take Bruce Banner and cause him to become identical with each of two numerically distinct monsters at the same time. Since Bruce could not be identical with two beings who were not identical with each other, not even God could bring about the one scenario that created a problem for the causal account.

What Should We Conclude?

As the judge presiding over the Bruce Banner trial, should you rule that Bruce Banner and the Hulk are the same person? I think you should—on the grounds that Bruce and the Hulk have, overall, the same, continuous set of relationships with the people around them. The relationships the Hulk seeks to have with other people seem essentially to be a continuation of those relationships Bruce Banner has already established with them—however incomplete and altered his behaviour might be in his

transformed state. Indeed, we often find that Bruce will form an intention to relate to these people in a certain way, and the Hulk's actions will reflect that ongoing intention. For instance, in the 2003 movie, Bruce is told over the phone by his father, David Banner, that steps have been taken to eliminate Betty Ross. Bruce immediately forms the intention to protect Betty and thereby thwart his father's plan. Later in a scene that doubtless caused poodle owners everywhere recurring nightmares, we see the Hulk destroy three mutated, blood-thirsty house dogs who have come for Betty.

Similarly, Betty Ross, David Banner, General "Thunderbolt" Ross and others relate to the Hulk as though he is the same person as Bruce Banner. Perhaps they do so because they have seen the form of the Hulk result from a transformation of Bruce's body, and they recognize in the mind of the Hulk some shreds at least of what they know about Bruce. It could be that physical, mental, and causal indicators are used by all of us in rough and ready ways as cues to the identity of others and thus to the appropriateness of relating to them in certain ways. But it still might be the case that these are only cues and clues to the deeper truth that ultimately it is a certain set of relationships that is constitutive of the fundamental identity under question.

Now, whether you as a judge ultimately find Bruce Banner guilty or not of destroying property is another matter. There may be mitigating circumstances or other exculpatory facts in the situation. In most documented appearances of the Hulk, it is others who seem to instigate conflict and make the Hulk go on the run. Perhaps *they* should be on trial for the destruction of property. Still, you cannot excuse Bruce on the grounds that he is not the same person as the Hulk. Bruce Banner is the same person as the Hulk because the two characters have a continuity of relationships with the people around them sufficient for this basic identity to hold true.

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