

MENTAL SURGERY: ANOTHER LOOK AT THE IDENTITY PROBLEM

*Dedicated to late Prof. C.S. Momoh ,
a thunderous philosopher, on the occasion of the sixth
anniversary of his transition to the world of forms*

By

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1. Introduction

Why does the same person continue to exist overtime, despite bodily changes? How do we know that we are today, the persons we were yesterday? What constitutes the person, is it the body, brain, soul or the memory? Are we going to survive our bodily death or is death the end thereof? And most importantly, Why am I me instead of not me? This very question may appear superficial at surface value but deep down, it is the basis of genetic diversity. Even farther than that, it is the explanation of one and many, of here and there, and of you and me. Were we all the same, then we would not talk of we, but I. In a world of "I", who am I? To this I respond, void!

But there is a long standing argument as to what constitutes me. In other words, what makes me a person? Is it the mind or the body? This problem was created early in the history of philosophy (Omoregbe, 183: Moreland,118-119) and down the line, so many years later, it is shadowing the application of personal identity. Most writers on this issue say the metaphysical soul is the person. They generally run into Ryle's category mistake,(Ryle,123) as well as the mistake of treating personhood as(in Leibnitz' term) a windowless monad(Russell,533). According to this view, bodily death is not the end of one's personal existence. This dualist view endorsed by Plato, Descartes and many others (Mautner, 417), is that we are a union of material body and nonmaterial soul. The body and the soul are different substances, one physical, the other mental, and each can exist without the other. It is the soul which gives us our distinctive identity (Descartes, 280-286), and it

does not perish when the body dies. We continue to exist in some nonmaterial realm. Others say it is the psychological mind or the memory. According to this criterion, it is the continuity of the mind's content rather than the body which ensures personal identity. We are the same persons we were yesterday because we have overlapping thoughts and memories from the past to the present. This is roughly the view expressed by John Locke, the first philosopher to systematically investigate the problem of personal identity (Furman and Avila, 146). Others include, Thomas Reid and David Hume to mention a few.

There is yet another criterion which I shall here classify as quasi-metaphysical. This is a view held by philosophers like Anthony Quinton which ultimately combines both the metaphysical and the psychological. It states that the disembodied thoughts and memories are the bastion of personal identity. This does not suggest the soul itself- a spiritual substance is the criterion of personal identity. Rather, the soul's contents i.e. the nonmaterial thoughts and memories are the criterion (157-162). This view beats imagination. For all we know, philosophers might here be raising the dust only to complain they cannot see.

The fourth criterion is the one I shall here classify as the survivalist criterion. Philosophers like Derek Parfit, and partly, Daniel Dennett espouse this view. This view reframes the question of personal identity to personal survival. With the pile of thought experiments which includes fission (dividing one person into two or more)and fusion(fusing two or more individuals into one person). These experiments are so complex that a definite answer becomes difficult such that we are tempted to abandon the question of personal identity. Promoters of this, hold that the important thing is the survival of the person, notwithstanding how many times over (Furman and Avila, 146). This means by implication that one man can have multiple identities. This is perhaps another case of philosophers making a mountain out of a dunghill.

The fifth criterion is the one called the physicalist. Bernard Williams is one of the very few who entertain this view in his famous maxim that "wherever my body goes, there I go"(154-156). The physical criterion holds that either the whole body or just the brain is the criterion of personal identity. We are the same persons we were because it is the same body or at least, the body is a continuation of the same body of yesterday. Interestingly, this is the view I advocate in this paper, only

that my theory covers the parts of the body which are directly perceivable. In other words, physical substances like the brain are not inclusive in this criterion of personal identity.

In this paper, I shall attempt to refute contrary arguments and then open above all, a new chapter to the discussion i.e. that identity is not a psychological or metaphysical property, it is a social property. It is not an individual-based judgment; it is not the Cartesian internal resolution or conviction (Ozumba,86-87). It is a sociological concept and it is a network. As a result, if we insist on the duality of a human being, then personal identity is to the body, and wherever it is, there lies identity. In doing this I shall help my position with arguments and clear analogies, so that understanding of these issues will not be smuggled from the hind door in an attempt to evade the examination of logic.

2. Mental Surgery and Identity Problem

Episode 1:

It was sometime in February 2005, I was seated in front of the jam packed hall in Ebonyi State University, listening and watching that god of a man, Prof. C. S. Momoh. He was a guest lecturer from the University of Lagos and I think he titled the paper “The Demiurge of Democracy and the Nnemmiri of Moralism”. I sat dazed and totally mesmerized by the depth of his knowledge. I went home with the question, “supposing I had this man's mind”?

A few months later, Prof. C.S. Momoh was diagnosed with a terminal heart disease. He was going to live for another three months and he will die. What if I inherit this man's mind? I picked a pen and wrote him. “I sincerely share your pains Prof; but I think it would be a sin to humanity should you take your mind to the grave to perish alongside your body. You could give it out. You could donate it to me”. He wrote back; he would not part with his mind, it was his identity- his very self, his essence. “Would you rather wish your essence to perish?” I wrote back.

The next I saw was an invitation from the famous Professor. We were going to talk extensively on that matter. Three days or so we dwelt on it inside his University of Lagos Office, he was the Faculty Dean. I never heard from him again, until one week before his death. He called to know if I had professionals that would conduct the surgery. Yes I think so.

Who are you that is thinking? He asked.

A creative and imaginary Jonathan. I responded.

Who do others think you are?

A plain, nameless Jonathan.

Which is your true identity? He asked.

I had no immediate answer.

In any case, I called Lagos State University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) and some surgeons said they could perform the mind transplant.

In two days, I was lying side by side with the adorable Prof. C.S. Momoh inside the same theatre, about to receive the priceless gift of many years of intellectual acquisition. I think the very last words he spoke to me were as follows:

You are sure about this son?

Yeah!

After this transplant are we going to remain whom we are?

Of course, I will remain the plain, sweet Mr. Jonathan and you will remain the old, wise Prof. C.S Momoh. They sedated him out of consciousness and I think the last thing I saw was the syringe. They must have cut open our heads or wherever our minds were located, harvested them and made a switch, His mind for my body and mine for his body.

Episode II:

From here onwards the entity with the body of Mr. Jonathan and the mind of Prof. C.S Momoh will be called Venus while the body of Prof. C.S Momoh and the mind of Mr. Jonathan will be called Sergitarius. It happened that the shock which trailed the surgery affected their short term memories.

When Sergitarius left the hospital in company of those that described themselves as his wife and children, he was in deep confusion but remained calm. He was visited by a strange, new set of friends- elderly generation, who addressed him as Professor. His body felt heavy and weak. But I am only 20 years old, what is all this? What is all this talk about my heart by this old woman. That dude they say is my last child is even older than me! Sergitarius checked the mirror and was terrified. What! I know this man.

He must get to University of Lagos at once. He needed to clarify something. When the driver pulled up in front of Faculty of Arts building, a few students gathered: Prof we have been waiting for your class. “Prof. won't be teaching today

“The driver said”. Hold on a second “Sergitarius said”, take me to your class, I will teach. So what course is this? Where did we stop?

They say it was Sergitarius' worst lecture.

When he finally left the class and was about to enter the Deans Office, he felt a sharp pain in his heart and fell down. The world was turning around. Poor Jonathan “Sergitarius muttered” is this the way it ends? He was convinced that it was Jonathan who was dying but the encircling crowd kept shouting, “Prof; are you okay?”

Prof. was not okay. He died.

Episode III:

When Venus woke up days later, he was not in Lagos, he was not even in his luxurious home. He was in a house that lacked virtually all basic amenities. It was also in an unfamiliar country-side. The woman that acted as his mother was not even as old as his wife. Folks who came around as friends were kids, damn! And what is this Jonathan – Jonathan thing, it's annoying. Did they not know I'm a reputable Professor at Unilag? But my body feels light and strong- I like it. With this kind of new vitality I could live for another 80 years or so. I want to introduce myself to these people, in case they do not know me and find out what this scenario is all about.

My name is Prof. C.S. Momoh, Dean Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos. Can someone explain what this situation is all about? “Venus demanded”. Eyes began to roll around in silence.

“So this is a case of kidnapping – eeh? “Venus spoke again”.

(Venus narrates) In days to come my freedom was further restricted. They kept calling me Jonathan, only this time they added Professor. Villagers gathered everyday, to listen to me teach. They marvel at my knowledge but they just won't let me go.

One day, I was reading a newspaper and I saw a caption: “Prof. C.S. Momoh Dies of Cardiac Arrest”. The media and their rumors “I said with a smile” I'm still alive.

On a second thought I said silently “so this is about kidnap for life”. Angrily, I challenged a woman that acted as an aunt:

“just let me go!”

Go where Joe? This is your home and we care for you, notwithstanding your condition.

Condition? I thought quietly. There was sincerity in her eyes. Is it possible that something is wrong with me? “I asked silently”. In days to come, this thought occupied me: one day, I saw myself in the mirror and

to my chagrin, I remembered one named Jonathan.

If this is Jonathan indeed, where am I?

(this thought experiment is undertaken in supposition that there is such an entity called mind, however, the existence of mind is denied in this paper)

3. The Argument

Many supporters of identity as a psychological thing rally on one point, i.e. that a person is a thing which thinks (Locke, 150: Reid, 319: Hume, 326:). This means that personhood or selfhood is tied to the brain or mind, whatever. In this way, it would be a psychological thing. A person would simply be a mind.

My response to this point is that such a conception of person is ill-founded and wrong. Person is not an internal but an external thing. It is a social concept not a psychological one. That I am what I think I am is socially meaningless for one cannot talk of person without the society. Without the society, there is no person. It may make a little sense to me when I say that I'm what I think I am, but how far does this go? How do I know that I am a person? I do not know of my person simply because I think I am a person. Supposing I am the only thinking thing in the world and I think I'm a person; would I, at all times, be sure of this thought? What evidence will I have? Obviously, my much celebrated thinking ability is apt to become deluding to me.

For the definition of self to be meaningful it must make sense to others, because person is meaningful only in relation to the society. It is in the community of persons that a person is identified. The identity of my person is in the eyes of others and their identities in my eyes. Just the same way I cannot see my eyes or ears, but others see them, although, it may be obvious to me I have them. Identity is a differentiating factor. It is a means by which we differentiate one from the rest. One therefore, cannot differentiate himself from himself. It must be from others. Thus, identity does not involve the internal mind but the external body.

We must understand that “I am what I think I am” or “where I think I am” is a delusion. The identity of a person is not what he thinks but what others see. That is why in politics, those who think they are the best candidates never get elected because others (voters) may not see them as such. I may be convinced that I am a criminal but if others do not see me as such, I'm not. Similarly, no matter how good I think I am, if others see me as a criminal; that becomes my identity. In our analogy, Venus thinks he is Prof. C.S. Momoh and Sergitarius thinks he is Mr. Jonathan but others see them differently. Although, Sergitarius could not perform as a Professor and Venus could not perform as Mr. Jonathan, what it means is not that

others are wrong about their true identities. However, what it means is that both of them are not normal again. But Venus retains his identity as Mr. Jonathan and Sergitarius retains his identity as Prof. C.S. Momoh. It does not matter what they think of themselves. It is the other that sorts the identity of a person. That is why in court sessions, the judges look for testimonies from others to convict or acquit an individual, because we cannot know the self except through others. Therefore, I am not what I think I am but what others say I am. But whatever the other says I am stems from his perception of my physical self because he cannot access the intangible, non-existent mind.

The conviction which every man has of his identity, as far back as his memory reaches needs no aid of philosophy to strengthen it; and no philosophy can weaken it.(Reid, 318).

This idea of memory as a proof for one's awareness of his identity is shared by Hume (326) and Locke (317). Great words from Thomas Reid no doubt, but most times linguistic beauty does not enforce facts. Was this memory not a possession of the brain? Is the brain not a part of the physical body? Were these memories not about the interaction between a person and other persons? Supposing mind exists, and one's mind was harvested at birth and thrown into void for 100 years, on retrieval, would it have memories? I believe this grounds the argument about memory both as a criterion of identity and as a property of the intangible mind.

A person is something indivisible and is what Leibnitz calls a monad (Reid, 319).

Reid obviously borrowed the wrong concept. The concept of person is indivisible so long as it rejects dualism. Otherwise, A person is an interactive social being. He cannot be a windowless monad because his identity is not self-contained, it is a network. Without the other, a person cannot be identified. Without identity, there can be no person. The concept of person is meaningful only in the social network and that is where persons draw their identities.

A ship of war, which has successively changed her anchors, her tackle, her sails, her masts, her planks and her timbers while she keeps the same name, is the same (Reid, 321).

Reid borrowed this dismembering argument from Hume (325).

This argument loses pedigree on two scores: Gilbert Ryle calls it a category mistake to assume that the parts put together is different from the real object (Dupre 329). Secondly and more seriously, let us try and apply this Reid's analogy to a human. It will give us a clearer picture since the personhood and identity that occupy us here are those of humans.

A man who has successively changed his legs, his arms, his tummy, his skin colour, his shoulders and his head, while he keeps the same name, is he still the same person?

Obviously not! This shows that the correct definition of person is the body we perceive.

In our thought experiment, we notice that Sagittarius was convinced he was Mr. Jonathan until he saw the mirror. And Venus was also convinced he was Prof. C.S. Momoh until he saw the mirror. Now the question is, when Sagittarius slumped and died, was it Mr. Jonathan or Prof. C.S. Momoh that died? To this I answer; it was the famous Prof. C.S Momoh who died not Mr. Jonathan.

Suppose I wholly lose the memory of some parts of my life, beyond a possibility of retrieving them, so that perhaps I shall never be conscious of them again; yet am I not the same person that did those actions, had those thoughts that I once was conscious of, though I have now forgot them? (Locke, 318).

To this I ask: if memory is the rock bottom proof of one's identity (Locke, 316: Reid, 320: Hume, 326) then, how can one retain his identity when it is lost? This shows that the deranged fellows who lost the memories in their lives have also lost their identities. But this is, in reality wrong because the mad men in our midst still retain their identities except that they are not normal fellows, in other words, their brains are malfunctioning just like an arm or an eye could malfunction. In this way, Venus was thought to be abnormal but his identity remained in tact.

An oak that grows from a small plant to a large tree, is still the same oak; though there be not one particle of matter or figure of its parts the same. An infant becomes a man, and is sometimes fat, sometimes lean, without any

change in his identity (Hume, 325).

What Hume was trying to show was that since the physical properties of the oak tree change and the oak still retains its identity, what constitutes its identity must be beyond the physical. But it is either Hume promotes animism (the idea that objects have souls) or he supports the physical criterion that the so-called changes which the human body undergoes is actually a natural continuation of the same body. In either case, he ends in a dilemma. But supposing we accept the Humean position that the physical change, then according to Quine, "it would be agreeable to be driven, by these considerations, to belief in a changeless and therefore nonmaterial soul as the vehicle of my persisting self-identity"(65). But we should also be eager to embrace Heraclitus' parallel problem regarding the river: "You cannot bathe in the same river twice, for new waters are ever flowing upon you"(Copleston, 39). If it is argued that the human body keeps changing, then this constant change is much more peculiar to the soul; for we notice that a man's reaction to a given circumstance yesterday varies from his reaction to the same circumstance today. This we very often explain away as maturity. But what we call daily maturity of the soul is a serious form of change. In fact it is argued by some and validly too, that the human soul does not just undergo change but what can be called soul reshuffling:

...there is a constant flow of souls through this body,
each psychologically similar to the preceding, as
there is a constant flow of water molecules down the
blue (Perry, 340).

If the advocates of the soul identity claim that the soul is the person, then, this is why we are not the same persons we were a few moments ago. A juvenile soul is different from an adult soul; an adult soul in mid-forties is different from an elderly soul in mid-nineties. If a juvenile soul occupies an adult body; it will not affect the identity of the adult but it can be said that the adult is not normal. Supposing souls exist, then they must be of many categories; weak, strong, wise, foolish, senile, vivacious, and so on. Like a river, they flow through the body, each taking a turn. Otherwise, how do we explain the nature of a juvenile who later became an adult. Can we say, his soul has attained maturation? How can an intangible, nonmaterial soul grow biologically? Therefore, we see that the soul is not changeless as proponents assume. On this score, the

permanence argument of the soul or the metaphysical criterion collapses.

In the "A dialogue on Personal Identity and immortality" (341), John Perry shares the views that the notion of the identity of a nonmaterial, unobservable, unextended soul seemed to make no sense at all. This he said, is one reason such souls cannot be what we are judging about, when we judge as to personal identity. Bodily identity, he goes further, at least makes sense. Also, he continues, (338) if identity of person consisted in identity of a nonmaterial, unobservable soul as they claim, then judgment of personal identity of the sort we make everyday whenever we greet a friend or avoid a pest are really judgments about such souls... but if such judgments were really about souls, they would all be groundless and without foundation. For we have no direct method of observing sameness of soul, and so on. However, he concludes, our judgment about persons are not all simply groundless and silly, so we must not be judging of nonmaterial souls after all.

The quasi-metaphysical criterion which suggests that personal identity is neither dependent on the body or on the brain, insists that the person can exist or survive without the body and even without the soul. In the words of Quinton, a strong advocate of this view, "All I have tried to show is that there is no necessary connection between the soul as a series of mental states linked by character and memory and any particular continuing human body"(161). What constitute the personal identity are the contents of the soul- the nonmaterial thoughts and memories. But this is bizarre, because taken as supposed, any substance whatsoever, even my own excreta would qualify as a person. All I need to do, is to assign some special Quintonian abilities to it which will enable it exist independent of a body and a brain. Again, the possibility of thoughts and memories existing independent of both body and brain is not only unthinkable but just a speculative pastime.

It is however, the survivalist criterion which attempts a shift from the original approach to a solitary one. Derek Parfit and Daniel Dennett champion this course. Both Derek and Dennett's cases are science fiction bizarre which try to solve the problems resulting from thought experiments. They established a point that the only way to escape is to by-pass the question of personal identity and focus on personal survival. Identity in the long run will depend on what they call psychological continuity(Parfit,163-168: Dennett, 326-333). The basic weakness of this view is that one person having multiple identities is

possible, as in when the thoughts and memories of one man is transferred to two or more bodies. We reject this on the ground that identity as a social concept will lose its meaning. It will now be possible for every body to become or qualify as every body in the long run. In moving from personal identity to personal survival, our ultimate goal was lost. Thus, to consider this criterion at all is to miss the point.

4. Conclusion

Identity is what makes a person different from another. In all the studies about the mind, there has been found not a single mark of peculiarity. But in human bodies we can talk of the finger prints, the eyes, the vocal vibration and so on. Taken in this light, Sergitarius can never be Mr. Jonathan and Venus can never be Prof. C.S. Momoh. They remain who they were. One basic criticism against the physical criterion is the one repeated by Quine in the following words;

Undergoing change as I do, how can I be said to continue to be myself? Considering that a complete replacement of my material substance takes place every few years, how can I be said to continue to be I for more than such a period at best?(65).

To this we offer a simple answer; my new body is a natural continuation of my old body. Even Aristotle explains this with the analogy of the acorn which grows into the oak tree(Barnes,95). For him, there is the oak in the acorn.

In any case, the argument has always been, which one comes first? Which one matters most? Which one is me first before the other? My spirit or my body? Supposing I say it is my spirit, then I shall plainly follow Descartes into solipsism (Ozumba, 86). For in proving my identity through the cogito, I irrevocably close the door to the identities of others. And if I'm only sure of my identity, it means therefore, that I can never be sure of the identities of others. But suppose again that my body comes first, then primarily, my identity becomes something assessable to others and theirs to me, and this is what identity truly consists of. Clyde Warrior writing about the status of the contemporary Amerindians states;

“...we are poor in spirit because we are not free”(189). Who are we? And why am I part of we instead of just me? This is because the individual is sorted in the group, she cannot be sorted from herself, his identity is in the eyes of others.

But here, I do not subscribe to the dichotomy between mind and

body. And so the question as to which comes first or which is the basic does not even arise. The theory of the duality of man, as old as it is, and as uncontested as it has been does not make it correct. Just like the geocentric conception that the earth is the center of the universe , uncontested for 1,800 years could not make it correct. The very idea that my favorite teacher, Prof. G. O. Ozumba can be broken into two distinct parts is in itself, absurd. This great error arose in philosophy I think, due to the complacent move to give a level playing ground to both physics and metaphysics, physical and spiritual, corporeal and incorporeal and of course, known and unknown. Thus having reached the erroneous conclusion that a person is made up of both mind and body, we chose the mind as the superior part and as such, the bastion of personal identity. This terrible choice is not essentially based on the flimsy reasons we give, but follows the normal human weakness of granting enormous power and of course, superiority to things beyond our comprehension. We fear God and say He is the Almighty not because we know this to be true but because we have no knowledge of Him. We very often conclude that what belongs to our friends is better than what we have- I desire my neighbor's wife or husband and wish she or he were mine because I assume she or he is a better spouse. We desire what we do not have and scorn what we have. The obvious is false, the uncanny is true. What we know is often dismissed as false and what we do not know accepted as true. The tapestry of our knowledge is often regarded as inferior while the forest of our ignorance is declared superior. Following this bizarre pattern, we conclude that the body which is obvious, which we know for certain is inferior and the mind which does not even exist is superior. It is our bodies which feels joy, hate, anger and indeed, all the emotions that attest to existence. It is our bodies which walk upon the earth, toil, communicate, bear names, come together to form people. It is our bodies that are called father, mother, brother, daughter and so on. It is our bodies that are celebrated when they triumph, rewarded when they excel, punished when they offend the law. When people come together, we differentiate their identities from their bodies, and nobody is asked to show his mind or its content. It is the body that is unique.

I do not dispute the reality of memories, but memories do not stand on their own, they must be possessed, in other words by the brain and never the mind which is a mere figment of thought. Brains however, are internal parts of the body and so, cannot stand on their own. The contents

of the brain are therefore, attributes of the body. The body therefore, is here defined as the person.

P.F. Strawson defines “person” as “a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristic, a physical situation, etc. are equally applicable to single individual of a single type”(102). It is after this demarcation, that philosophers finding they could not define mind let alone locate it, inexorably award it a place of reverence in their theory. In line with this, Herbert Feigl like many others declares without justification that the mental is the basic and underlying reality while the physical merely refers to this mental reality (474-475). But we have conclusively in this paper, raised a point of objection to the duality of person and to the misplacement of this.

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