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# Breaking through continuity: a Jamesian account of the self

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## Abstract

In personal identity debates, William James's notion of stream of thoughts has been widely used to defend psychological continuity as criterion for unity in life. However, the idea of a continuous consciousness does not explain the feeling of discontinuity we may experience within our stream of thoughts. For example, a repented criminal no longer feels herself as the same person who committed the crime, even though she may numerically be the same, or a person who undergoes a religious conversion finds herself completely transformed in relation to her previous life. In these cases, we do not have two streams, as James admits in personality disorders, but rather a break within the same stream. Another compelling question is whether psychological continuity is really what matters in our daily life. As James himself points out, we tend to identify ourselves with what we hold most dear, like family, our house, possessions, etc. So, the stream of consciousness seems to not reflect our sense of self. How can we explain such dynamic in terms of continuity of consciousness?

My thesis is that the idea of the stream needs to be integrated with the one of interest, which is in fact further developed by James in his later works and finds articulated expression in Varieties. According to James, our mind is directed by goals and aims (i.e. interest) which shape perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and actions (even involuntary reflexes). Interests express what matter for us in each circumstance by directing our attention and defining what is at the center of our fields of experiences. For instance, if I entered into a room looking for a pair of glasses, my perception would be guided towards small objects on the table, whereas if I were a painter the colorful walls would occupy my sight. Interests can also change over time, so that what matters for us today may become irrelevant tomorrow, sometimes making us feeling completely different persons, for we hold completely different values– to be precise, interest changes almost constantly during the day, even though more general interests such as beliefs, desires, convictions may exhibit a certain degree of persistence. Thus, thoughts arise not only in continuity with each other but also in relation to the interest that shapes them.

Interests, however, are not produced by the stream and the reasons for their ingress into experience, while emotional in nature, remains mysterious: why do certain interests take over our fields of consciousness and not others? why do we suddenly understand things which were obscure before? Or why do we find attractive the friend who never caught our attention before? Narrative views on the self have tried to integrate these interests in accounting for personal identity. Continuity in life is given by the story that one is able to tell about her experiences, a story that provides meaning to the continuous stream of our life. Yet, if we follow James, interests are constitutive of experience, rather than over imposed by

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a narrative. A narrative recognizes interests that are already at play— and in fact a narrative can even tell an inadequate story about our deep motivations.

Moreover, a narrative cannot reach out those moments in life (e.g. infancy) for which we do not have memories – Schechtman has recently added to the Constitutive Narrative View that not only our own stories but also other people’s stories about our life need to be considered. However, this would leave unexplained why certain experiences (e.g. a repressed or disassociated trauma) can provoke serious effects on one’s life even though the subject does not remember it and nobody else knows about it. In a word, the narrative view does not explain embodied memory.

On the one hand psychological continuity comes back here as fundamental to extend psychological continuity to those transmarginal moments in life that do not fit into any narrative; and yet, on the other, psychological continuity needs to be completed by interests that determine the quality of the passage from one state to the other. Thus, with James, we can set up a pragmatic understanding of the self which gives Justice to both the literal instance of persistence over time and our sense of discontinuous identity.

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