

In what sense are you the same person today that you were when you were ten?

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Abstract:

This analysis explores the relationship between our present selves and our ten-year-old selves, emphasizing the shared ontological basis that connects us over time while acknowledging the fluidity of personal identity. Although traits and characteristics may persist, they are often subject to reinterpretation due to the subjective workings of memory and perception. These distortions can lead to a divergence from our past selves, driving the evolution of identity in new directions. While our current identity is undeniably influenced by early experiences, it is not fixed; it continuously evolves through the dynamic nature of memory. This process highlights the complexity of self-continuity, where identity is shaped by a delicate balance between the enduring elements of our past and the transformative forces of subjective experience. Ultimately, our identity is a fluid construct, grounded in the past yet adaptable, capable of evolving in response to both internal and external influences.

Keywords: identity; continuity; memory; perception evolution

1. Introduction

An individual's identity is a profound and multifaceted concept, deeply rooted in the complex and evolving perception of what it means to be human.

^[1] Far from being a fixed or static construct, identity develops dynamically through the continuous interplay between inherent wisdom and experiential knowledge, both of which contribute uniquely to our self-awareness and understanding. Inherent wisdom refers to the deep, intuitive knowledge that emerges from one's intrinsic nature—those innate qualities and tendencies that form the foundation of our being. These are the fundamental aspects of who we are, guiding our initial modes of perception and shap-

ing the lens through which we view the world. This wisdom is often instinctive, emerging from our core identity without the need for conscious reasoning.

In contrast, experiential knowledge is acquired over time through interactions with the external world, encompassing the lessons and insights gleaned from lived experiences. These encounters with the material and social environment challenge and refine our inherent understanding, enabling us to adapt and reshape our interpretations of the world. As we navigate different experiences, from relationships to societal roles, we are constantly assimilating new information that contributes to the ongoing formation of our identity.

The relationship between inherent wisdom and experiential knowledge is not one of opposition, but rather a complementary and symbiotic process. Inherent wisdom provides the initial framework through which we make sense of our surroundings, while experiential knowledge acts as a catalyst for growth, allowing us to adjust and expand that framework. Over time, as we encounter new situations and face challenges, our innate understanding becomes more nuanced, enriched by the complexity and diversity of our experiences. This dynamic interaction between the internal and external realms is crucial in the development of a cohesive sense of self.

Moreover, this synthesis between innate wisdom and acquired experience is not only central to individual identity but also critical in shaping our broader worldview. The way we perceive ourselves in relation to others, our place in society, and our understanding of the larger human condition is deeply influenced by this ongoing negotiation between the internal and external dimensions of our being. Identity, therefore, is an ever-evolving narrative, one that is constantly being rewritten as we grow, learn, and adapt to the world around us. This fluidity is what allows us to engage meaningfully with the complexities of human experience, ensuring that our sense of self remains both authentic and responsive to change^[2].

These two major components of personal identity—innate wisdom and acquired experience—are intricately woven together into what we commonly refer to as memories. Memories serve as the bridge between our past and present selves, allowing us to evaluate and compare our current identity with who we were at earlier stages of life, such as at the age of ten.

Memories, which encompass both Empiricist and Rationalist elements, serve as a fundamental mechanism in shaping our understanding of the trajectory of our lives. They are not passive records but dynamic constructs that influence how we perceive ourselves and the world around us. From the moment of birth through the formative years up to the age of ten, and extending into adulthood, our memories are constantly being constructed, altered, and reshaped in response to our ongoing experiences and personal growth. These memories, far from being static snapshots, evolve alongside us, reflecting the continuous development of our identity.^[3] They encapsulate past thoughts, emotions, interactions, and lessons, providing a reservoir of experiences from which we draw meaning and insight, serving as a powerful tool for self-reflection and the ongoing process of self-definition.

Philosophers have long debated the nature and function of memory in human existence, with many describing it as “a capacity exercised by single individuals,”^[4] emphasizing its role in preserving continuity and personal identity.

According to this view, memory acts as the thread that ties together different stages of our lives, enabling us to recognize ourselves as the same individuals we were at the age of ten, despite the inevitable changes brought by time. This continuity is essential for a coherent sense of self; through memory, we maintain a link between our past and present, allowing us to experience our life as a unified whole rather than as a series of disconnected episodes.

However, the role of memory extends beyond mere continuity. It actively participates in the construction of identity by selectively emphasizing certain aspects of the past while downplaying or even altering others. This reconstructive nature of memory means that the way we recall events is often influenced by our present emotions, beliefs, and desires. As a result, our memories not only preserve who we were but also interact with who we are now, contributing to the ongoing evolution of our identity. This malleability allows for growth and change, as we reinterpret past experiences in light of new insights and perspectives.

Furthermore, memory’s role in identity formation is deeply intertwined with both Empiricist and Rationalist philosophical traditions. From an Empiricist standpoint, memories are rooted in sensory experiences and interactions with the world, grounded in the tangible and concrete events that shape our understanding of reality. In contrast, the Rationalist perspective highlights memory’s connection to internal cognitive processes, emphasizing how reason and reflection shape the way we organize and interpret our experiences. Together, these perspectives illustrate how memory operates as a bridge between external experience and internal cognition, playing a crucial role in how we navigate the world and understand our place within it.

Ultimately, memories are not simply a record of our past—they are integral to the ongoing narrative of our lives, constantly reshaped by new experiences and evolving perceptions. They serve as both the foundation of continuity and the engine of personal growth, allowing us to remain connected to who we once were while also embracing who we are becoming. In this sense, memory is not just a passive repository but an active force in the construction of identity, shaping how we comprehend our life’s trajectory and making us who we are.

To fully understand how identity is shaped over time, we can explore the common threads within different stages of life by examining three distinct phases of memory:

Phase 1: Memories formed at and before the age of ten.

Phase 2: Memories accumulated from the age of ten to the present.

Phase 3: The way individuals in the present project and interpret memories of the past.

By analyzing these phases, we gain insight into how our

identity is both a reflection of our past and a projection of our present self-conception, continuously shaped by the interplay of innate wisdom and acquired experiences.

2. Memories at and before the age of ten

In the earliest stages of life, our perceptual faculties begin to develop, establishing the foundation upon which our identity is built.^[5] During this critical period, especially before the age of ten, the memories we form play a significant role in shaping our sense of self. These early memories, though often fragmented and subject to fading over time, capture the essence of our experiences and perceptions, laying the groundwork for the evolving narrative of who we are. While the precise details of these memories may blur, their emotional and psychological impact remains embedded in our consciousness, subtly influencing our thoughts, behaviors, and identity in profound ways.

For instance, a child who experiences abuse or harsh parenting during these formative years is likely to carry the emotional weight of those experiences into adulthood. These memories, deeply intertwined with the child's developing sense of self, leave lasting imprints on their psyche. As the individual grows, these early experiences may resurface in the form of emotional reactions or behavioral tendencies. For example, someone who was subjected to severe criticism as a child might find that similar feelings of inadequacy and fear resurface during high-pressure situations in adulthood, such as exams or performance evaluations. Their aversion to these situations may not be about the task itself but rather the negative associations rooted in those early memories of harsh judgment.

These examples highlight the powerful connection between memory and personal identity. According to philosopher Marya Schechtman, in order to make sense of their past, individuals must engage in the process of summarizing, constructing, and interpreting distinct moments, weaving them into a coherent narrative.^[6] This process of narrative construction becomes a key component of identity, even when the influence of these memories is not always immediately visible in day-to-day behavior. Whether memories directly shape decision-making or linger in the subconscious background, they contribute to the ongoing construction of self by providing emotional and experiential contexts that are unique and irreplaceable. The emotional resonance of these early memories becomes a backdrop for personal growth, ensuring that past experiences continue to inform and shape the trajectory of our identity throughout life.

It's important to recognize that the memories that shape

our identity are not fleeting or easily forgotten. Instead, they are the enduring imprints of significant experiences that remain with us, continuously influencing how we perceive ourselves and how we interact with the world. These memories serve as the threads that weave together the fabric of our identity, connecting our past selves with who we are today.

3. Memories from the age of ten to the present

This phase in life is primarily marked by development and transformation. The memories formed during this period can be viewed as a continuation of the identity that was initially established at the age of ten.^[7] These memories allow us to trace the common threads of identity across different stages of life, revealing a continuity that persists despite the passage of time. However, as individuals accumulate new experiences and possibly undergo shifts in their epistemological perspectives, these new experiences can introduce changes in how they perceive themselves and the world around them.

The preservation of certain core memories helps maintain a consistent sense of self, while the incorporation of new experiences can lead to an evolution in identity. For instance, a person who experienced harsh parenting at ten remains fundamentally the same individual who carries those memories into adulthood. The emotional and behavioral responses to those early experiences may still be present, shaping their reactions to similar situations. Yet, when new experiences contrast with these early memories, they can lead to significant shifts in perception and self-identity.

Consider the scenario where this individual moves away from their parents' home to live in a school dormitory. In this new environment, they might encounter teachers who treat them with kindness, leniency, and encouragement, offering a stark contrast to the harsh treatment they received from their parents. This new experience could profoundly alter their outlook, transforming their view of academic performance. Whereas they might have once dreaded exams due to the fear of punishment, they could begin to see tests as opportunities for self-improvement, driven by the positive reinforcement they now receive.

While such a drastic change in perception might not occur for everyone who has had new experiences since the age of ten, the key point is that these changes are often rooted in the contrast between old and new memories. It is through this juxtaposition that individuals can reassess their past and integrate new values, such as the realization of the importance of encouragement. The absence of such

contrasting experiences might result in a different trajectory, underscoring how both continuity and change are integral to the development of identity. Despite the evolution that occurs, these changes are built upon the foundation of earlier memories, ensuring that, ontologically, we remain the same person we were at ten, albeit with a more nuanced and developed sense of self.^[8]

4. Projected memories of the past from individuals in the present

However, there are certain aspects of memories that challenge the notion of us being completely identical to our past selves. Just as memories from earlier stages of life can solidify and shape identity, this stage of life also has the potential to create new facets of personality that diverge from the past. The continuity in the mode of memory is maintained, as memories continue to function as a means of organizing and recalling events and emotions. Yet, as these memories are often recollections of a distant past, they are susceptible to deviations and alterations.

As individuals reflect on their past, they may reconstruct their memories, sometimes reshaping them into narratives that are more favorable or aligned with their current identity. This process of introspection can lead to reinterpretations of past experiences or even the creation of entirely new experiences that never actually occurred. These fabricated recollections are often referred to as “quasi-memories.”^[9-10] Unlike genuine memories, quasi-memories do not require the person to have actually lived the experience; instead, they can involve recalling events that never happened or attributing someone else’s experiences to themselves.

The phenomenon of quasi-memories highlights the flexibility and fluidity of identity over time.^[11] It has been argued that memory plays a key role in targeting the identity of a person.^[12] For example, an individual who experienced trauma in their childhood might unconsciously modify those memories, transforming them into something more palatable or acceptable.^[13] They might add a happy ending to a distressing event or emphasize a positive aspect that didn’t originally exist. This modification doesn’t necessarily change the fundamental identity of the person, but it does suggest that the person we are now might not be entirely the same as the person we were in the past. Also, this function of memory is continuous working during the span of a person’s life.^[14]

This concept is reminiscent of the philosophical paradox known as the “Ship of Theseus,” where a ship’s components are gradually replaced over time until none of the original parts remain. Despite these changes, the ship is

still considered the same vessel. Similarly, individuals who replace their experiences with quasi-memories retain some connection to their past selves, yet these alterations can lead to a significantly different sense of identity. The original memories may serve as a foundation, but the new, reconstructed memories can create an individual who is notably distinct from their past self.^[15]

In this sense, the continuity of identity is not merely a substitution of parts or experiences; rather, it embodies a deeper, ongoing process of integrating old desires and longings with new experiences. The identity that was fostered in the past provides the framework upon which new memories and perceptions are built. However, this process can also lead to changes in the individual’s current personality and outlook, resulting in differences between who they are now and who they were in the past.

In conclusion, while there is an inherent continuity in our identity over time, the alterations and reconstructions of our memories suggest that we are not entirely the same person as we were in the past. Our identity is a dynamic, evolving construct, shaped by both genuine and quasi-memories, and influenced by the way we choose to interpret and reframe our experiences. This dynamic nature of identity underscores the complexity of the self and the ongoing interaction between our past, present, and future selves.

5. Conclusion

By exploring the different phases of life and their impact on identity, we can conclude that the connection between a person at their current age and their ten-year-old self is existential but limited in several key ways. Fundamentally, individuals may share certain core experiences from both stages of life, as early experiences play a pivotal role in shaping identity. These memories act as threads that weave together the past and present, offering a sense of continuity that links who we were with who we have become.

However, it is important to acknowledge that memories are not static or unchanging. They are shaped by subjective mental processes and continuously influenced by our current perspectives, emotions, and desires. As we age, our recollection and interpretation of past experiences can evolve, sometimes significantly. This reconstruction of memory is often unconscious, a natural way in which the mind processes and makes sense of the world. We may unknowingly adjust or reinterpret past events to align with a more satisfying or coherent narrative, even if these adjustments deviate from the original reality.

The malleability of memory complicates the continuity of identity. While memory changes are not inevitable,

they occur frequently enough to challenge the idea of a straightforward connection between past and present selves. This insight reveals that personal identity is fluid and susceptible to the influence of current mindsets, which can reshape our memories and, as a result, our sense of self. The identity we carry from the past is not immune to the present's influence, highlighting the complexity of maintaining a continuous sense of self over time.

Given this understanding, when addressing the commonalities and differences between our present selves and our ten-year-old selves, it becomes evident that while a shared ontological basis connects us, this sameness is far from absolute. The traits and characteristics that define us may endure over time, but they can also be distorted, reinterpreted, or reshaped through the subjective workings of our minds. This distortion arises from the natural processes of memory and perception, which can lead us to develop in ways that diverge from our earlier selves, ultimately guiding our identity in new directions.

It is safe to say that our current identity is built upon the foundation of our past, no matter how much time has passed. The experiences we encountered at the age of ten continue to influence us, forming part of the psychological framework that shapes who we are today. Yet, this influence is not static or linear. The identity that emerges from our past remains subject to the fluid and dynamic forces of memory, interpretation, and perception. In this sense, while we are undeniably constructed from the essence of our past selves, the identity we embody today is a living, evolving entity, continuously redefined by how we reinterpret our experiences in light of present emotions, thoughts, and desires.

This understanding of identity underscores the inherent complexity and nuance involved in the continuity of self. It suggests that while a fundamental connection links our past and present, identity is not a fixed point but an ongoing process—a process shaped by the interplay of memory's constancy and its inherent malleability. The continuity of self, then, is not an unbroken thread but a tapestry, woven from both the enduring elements of our past and the evolving perspectives that emerge over time.

As a result, the trajectory of our identity is guided by a delicate balance between the enduring influences of our early experiences and the transformative power of subjective reinterpretation. Our sense of self evolves in response to both external circumstances and internal reflections, leading to an identity that, while grounded in our past, remains in flux, capable of adapting to the complexities of life. Ultimately, this fluidity allows us to grow, adapt, and

become new versions of ourselves, while still maintaining a core connection to who we once were.

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