

An Epistemic Component to Personal Identity: the Case of Religious Conversion¹

Simon Evnine, Miami

Under what conditions is a person *a* at time *t* the same person as a person *b* at a later time *t'*? This is the problem of personal identity over time. In this paper, I wish to argue that there is a necessary (though not sufficient) epistemic condition for identity. I will explain this condition and offer some support for it. I will then discuss a case - religious conversion - where it is arguable both that the necessary condition fails to obtain and that there is a failure of identity. If the case displays a fruitful co-occurrence between these two failures, that will be some evidence in favor of my necessary condition.

The epistemic condition I have in mind derives from Bas van Fraassen's Principle of Reflection:

(Reflection) $P_{a,t}(Q|P_{b,t'}(Q)=r)=r$.

This principle requires that *a*, at *t*, believes *Q* to degree *r* conditionally on *b*'s believing *Q* to degree *r* at *t'*. Van Fraassen (1984) argues that, when *b=a*, Reflection is a requirement of rationality. My claim is

(R) Conformity to Reflection is a necessary condition for the identity of *a* and *b*.

Let me begin by saying some of what conformity to Reflection does *not* involve. First, it does not require that one's beliefs undergo no change. The question that will concern us is rather, what kinds of belief change, and how much of it, is consistent with Reflection, and hence with identity. Secondly, there are usually many hypotheses about what our future degrees of belief might be. Satisfying Reflection involves instantiating the schema above for all hypotheses about future degrees of belief. But since we will rarely have any reason to accept any particular hypothesis about what those future degrees of belief will be, satisfying Reflection will rarely have any consequences for our current *unconditional* degrees of belief. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, I take conformity to Reflection to be a matter of degree. One can conform to the principle (to a high degree) even if one does not satisfy every instance of it. Since there is vagueness in what counts as a high degree of conformity, there will be, on (R), a corresponding vagueness in the concept of personal identity. Since, I believe, any plausible account of personal identity should recognize its vagueness, this is fine. What is important is whether (R) captures the 'right' vagueness for personal identity. This is what I shall be putting to the test when we come to conversion.

What supports (R)? Reflection has the form of what Gaifman (1985) calls an expert function. *b* is an expert for *a* if learning what *b*'s degrees of belief are is enough for *a* to make them her own. (R) thus implies that a necessary condition of the identity of *a* at *t* and *b* at *t'* is that *b* should be an expert for *a* - we must take our future selves as expert relative to our present selves. The basic idea behind taking one's future selves as expert is what I call *normal epistemic change*. A preliminary characterization of this notion (to be refined below) is change in epistemic state that occurs for one of three

reasons: a) we acquire new information; b) we acquire new skills in interpreting information; c) we apply (more carefully) our skills to our information. Under normal circumstances, changes in epistemic state arising from any of these causes will make us more expert. Hence, if all our epistemic change is normal, our future selves will be expert relative to our present selves, and we should satisfy Reflection with respect to them. (R) follows from this connection between normal epistemic change and Reflection if we make the following connection between identity and normal epistemic change:

(P) A person ceases to exist by undergoing too much abnormal epistemic change.

('Too much' is vague in the same way that 'high degree' above was vague.)

If we assume that where there is normal epistemic change Reflection should hold, we must consider (P), and the link between (ab)normal epistemic change and identity, to see whether, ultimately, we should accept (R). The literature is replete with apparent counter-examples to Reflection of the following kind. Take the hypothesis that, as a result of hypnosis, I will later believe I am a pumpkin. Reflection would have me now believe, given that hypothesis, that I am a pumpkin. But that is absurd. In this example, the epistemic change between my current state, in which I do not believe I am a pumpkin, and my future state, in which I do, is abnormal: it is induced by hypnosis. Most of the counter-examples to Reflection are variants of this case and involve intuitively abnormal epistemic change. But since (P) only requires that a person cannot undergo *too much* abnormal epistemic change, we need not argue that identity is not preserved in these examples, so long as they involve only a small range of beliefs. What I want to focus on for the rest of this paper are cases in which there is much more extensive abnormal epistemic change. If (P) is correct, we should expect to find that there is some sense, in such cases, that personal identity is at stake. (Since, as I have indicated, the notion of 'too much' abnormal change is vague, we need not expect a clear cut failure of identity. It will be enough if identity is problematic.)

I shall concentrate on religious conversion, which, to my knowledge, has not been studied in this context. But first a few remarks about another, perhaps simpler case that will allow to me to make a methodological point. If somebody suffers a serious form of dementia (bringing with it a high degree of abnormal epistemic change), we find it not implausible, though not obligatory either, to conceptualize this in terms of failure of identity. The senile person is no longer the same person as she was before. We have a host of ways of talking about this that reflect ambivalence about the identity of the person with her former self: "so-and-so is no longer there"; "just a shadow of her former self"; and so on. Such locutions express, often in metaphorical ways, discontinuity. But I think there is no hard fact about whether talk of discontinuity itself

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functions merely as a metaphor for drastic change or as indicating a failure of identity. This can only be settled in the light of a theory of personal identity. But, along with Carol Rovane (1998, 59-64), I think that our normal conceptions of personal identity are sufficiently incoherent that any consistent theory will be revisionary. Such revisionary theories do not represent antecedent facts of the matter, so much as give us ways of conceptualizing the messy data that life provides. They should be judged by how fruitful they are in application to difficult cases.

There are many modalities of religious conversion, gradual, reasonbased, pragmatic, etc. I shall confine myself to one modality: that in which a non-believer, as a result of a sudden particular experience, becomes a believer. I take it that in conversion, particularly of this sudden type, there is some sense that the identity of the pre- and post-conversion person is put into question. The language of being born again is testimony to this. Other language is also suggestive: "becoming Sons of God" (i.e. changing parentage), "the newness of life", "being buried with Christ" (i.e. to mark the end of the previous life). If there were no limitations on the size of this paper, this would be the place to undertake an extensive examination of the religious language surrounding conversion, descriptions made by converts of their experiences, etc. As it is, I shall just take it for granted that identity is at least problematized.

What kinds of changes in epistemic state are involved in conversion? Clearly, one comes to believe that God exists where before one either disbelieved this or was agnostic. But this is just the beginning. New ways of life will come with a whole host of new beliefs. Newly acquired love and fear of God will interact with beliefs in complex ways. There will also be changes in systemic features, such as what is taken as evidence for what. So, the changes in epistemic state will be many and ramified. However, we should also not ignore the obvious fact that there will be vast amounts of epistemic continuity. Very likely (in so far as such quantifications make sense at all) the bulk of our epistemic state will be unaffected, but the affected parts will be especially important.

Will this epistemic change be abnormal? The three types of normal change, remember, were those brought about by a) more information; b) new skills in interpreting information; and c) application of our skills to our information. The changes wrought by sudden conversions obviously do not fall under c). It might seem as if such changes fall happily under a). The sudden conversion experience is one in which a person, say, hears a voice from Heaven; conversion is simply the response to this new information. But this is not quite right. The information itself is consistent with any number of interpretations. Why think that it is a sign of God? From the pre-conversion point of view, the possibility of such information would certainly be put down to some other type of cause. (I assume that the pre-conversion non-believer does not treat God's existence as an ordinary empirical hypothesis for which certain events would be good evidence. Such a perspective is, surely, possible but my case is not an example of it.)

By arguing in this way that the epistemic changes in conversion do not fall under a), it may seem as if they obviously *do* fall under b). What happens in conversion is not new information *per se*, although that might play some role. What seems essential is that one comes to see information in a different way. One is endowed with a new faculty, so to speak, which reveals the presence of God in things that one might have perceived before, but not have been able to detect God in. This seems promising as a way of understanding the epistemic changes in

conversion. But this very fact should make us realize that the characterization of normal epistemic change above was too rough with respect to b). b) is in the definition of normal epistemic change to allow for certain types of new skills we may acquire. As we age, we may gain an emotional maturity that enables us better to understand people's behavior. Furthermore, one may acquire skills deliberately, as when one learns a new language, or takes a class in accounting. It is cases such as these that lead to normal epistemic change. But when someone becomes paranoid, and so acquires a new 'skill' in seeing malicious motives behind apparently innocent actions, or if someone suddenly takes herself to understand the language of birds, this leads to abnormal epistemic change. How should we characterize the, I hope intuitive, differences between these types of cases?

Not surprisingly, part of what makes some skills sources of normal epistemic change, and some of abnormal, has to do with the natural facts of human life. New skills involved in maturation happen naturally, as a part of ordinary development. Others, such as learning new languages, are the kinds of skills humans are well suited to acquire. Paranoia, at least of an extreme variety, is not a natural part of human life. This much almost everyone will agree too. But of course, there are likely to be differences of opinion about other skills as to whether or not they are natural. Many theists think that we naturally have an ability to sense God's existence. Non-theists will disagree. The significance of this fact, for our present topic, is great. It means that there is no conception of the exact content of normal epistemic change that is independent of one's epistemic starting point. Regarding the convert, there will be at least two different verdicts: from the non-believer (including the convert's earlier self), that the epistemic change involved in conversion is abnormal; and from the believer (including the convert), that the change was normal, the effect of the de-occlusion of the formerly sin-impaired ability to sense the presence of God.

If we can give no absolute answer to the question of whether the epistemic change in conversion is normal, is it impossible to assess whether we can match the way in which identity is put into question in conversion with the abnormality of the epistemic change involved? There are two possible answers to this question. First, we could say that the standards in play are those of the person to whom Reflection applies. Thus, from the non-believer's point of view, the change in conversion would be abnormal. Hence, the questionableness of identity is matched by the abnormality of the epistemic change. Secondly, we could say that in cases, such as conversion, where the epistemic change induces a change in the very standards of what counts as normal epistemic change, whether the change is normal is relative to the standards used. In that case, the attempt in (R) to link Reflection with personal identity, through the notion of normal epistemic change (i.e. through (P)), will be vastly complicated, if not frustrated altogether. However, there need be no threat to (P) itself, if we accept that judgments of identity, like judgments of the normality of some epistemic change, may also be relative to epistemic standards. The non-believer, hypothesizing her own future conversion, might see this as bringing her continued identity into question; the believer may see it as a person having 'found herself.' That judgments of personal identity might be relative in this way may appear odd. In fact, it is the consequence of the fact already posited, that such judgments will be relative to a theory of personal identity. The different epistemic standards of what counts as normal epistemic change associated with the believer and the non-believer are likely to be associated, in

turn, with different theories of the person and her identity over time.

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