CONSCIOUSNESS RESEARCH, HEDONIC TONE, PERSONAL IDENTITY, PSYCHEDELIC

Ontological Qualia: The Future of Personal Identity

December 17, 2015 by algekalipso

> *WARNING* If you are not psychologically robust, this *may* be a memetic hazard. It talks about ideas that may affect hedonic tone in people susceptible to bad philosophical experiences.

Personal Identity

What is personal identity? The word *consciousness* has many meanings. Some of them are mundane, such as "social awareness." Others are extremely fundamental, like the nature of qualia. Likewise, *personal identity* has multiple meanings that are at entirely different levels in the philosophical hierarchy for how *fundamental* the questions are. A mundane sense of *personal identity* is "how people see you, and how you perceive yourself relative to others." This article is not about that. Here the sense of this concept I will address is evoked by the question: What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for my existence?

Say someone is pointing at a given person somewhere in the multiverse. What information do I need to know in order to assert that "this person is me, and I am/did/will experience what he is experiencing"?

Related to this question, we also have what Derek Parfit defined as *the question of survival*. This is evoked by the following question: Under what circumstances will I exist in the future?

In principle, answering the first question will give you a direct answer to the second question. Answering the second one, however, does not necessarily answer the first one. In this article I will focus on the first question; I will note, however, that what people usually care about is the second one. Why? This is probably due to emotional reasons; caused by how our modeling of our future is implemented emotionally in our consciousness. We are wired to seek our own survival, so that inclusive fitness is maximized. It seems that, somehow, what we care about is whether "we will exist in the future" and not "whether some person in another dimension is also me." Implicitly, we care about whether we can anticipate future experiences. Not, unfortunately, what the *ultimate truth of identity* really is.

I would argue, however, that a rational "selfish" individual who wants to survive should also take seriously the question of personal identity: Even though it does not engage him or her at an emotional level, it still gives you *what truly matters*.

It gets worse: Even though most young people believe, at an intellectual level, that it is truly *they* who will experience life as an old individual when the time comes, in practice hyperbolic discounting tends to make us care very little about our (far) future selves. Our survival programs are implemented in a peculiar way, using emotions such as anticipation, desire, and fear, prioritizing perceptually-large, salient and soon-to-be possibilities rather than objectively bigger problems and opportunities in the far future. From an evolutionary point of view this makes sense: Hyperbolic discounting can be explained as a direct consequence of living in uncertain environments. Our ancestral environments were chaotic and unpredictable; if given the chance, placing all of one's resources into a plan that guarantees one's survival for a day was more effective than dividing equally one's resources into improving the chances of surviving tomorrow and next year.

Emotional, Propositional, Ontological Qualia

Competing with our visceral anticipation we also have another representation of one's survival: A cognitive understanding, which is implemented with thought and propositional beliefs. I call this *propositional qualia*; this is the very ineffable quality of one's thoughts and propositional beliefs. Although this is a controversial idea, I am confident that our *thoughts have a certain subjective quality*. Propositional qualia probably evolved alongside with language and complex social cognition, and it is one of the largest differences between the subjective experience of human and non-human animals.

Propositional qualia is "the way our beliefs and counterfactual reasonings about the world feel." This qualia is flexible and changes as we think. We start to develop it at the age of 3, and it is not fully mature until roughly our early 20s. Contra purely functionalist accounts of consciousness, the way thought feels like is not merely the result of neural networks churning away searches in a state-space of possibilities. Propositional qualia is, in itself, the instrument with which we do our thinking (via local phenomenal binding constraint satisfaction, but that story is for another article).

There is also a deeper sort of qualia that changes a lot less frequently, and seems to underpin people's experience of philosophy, spirituality and religion. I call this o*ntological qualia*. This is the way in which "beliefs about the nature of reality, the self and consciousness feel like."

Psychedelics are well known for being able to change the quality of one's sensory experience, produce distortions and greatly amplify emotions. What is less frequently talked about is how they also drastically change one's propositional and ontological qualia. For example, there are reports of people who were devoted materialists and atheists for their entire lives, who suddenly experienced a profound sense of universal oneness after smoking a bit of 5-MeO-DMT.

Philosophical activity recruits a mixture of propositional and ontological qualia. Typically, people have settled ontological qualia, and they express it by playing with propositional qualia. Another way of saying this: People's "deeply held beliefs and intuitions" rarely change. Rather, these beliefs inform the way they think and approach philosophical questions.

I would argue that beliefs about personal identity are propositional qualia that are informed by underlying ontological qualia. What are these beliefs?

Thanks to Daniel Kolak (the writer of "I am You") we now have very clear vocabulary to discuss broad varieties of beliefs about personal identity. These varieties are:

Closed Individualism (CI)

This is the common-sense view of survival and personal identity. Most people are Closed Individualists. Our implicit gut feeling is largely Closed Individualistic. This view states that "you begin to exist when you are born and you stop existing when you die." That said, this is only the classic formulation. One can be a Closed Individualist and believe in God, and the after-life. For example, people who believe in mainstream Abrahamic religions are usually Closed Individualists (gnostics and mystics being exceptions). With an after-(or pre-)life, the formulation is only slightly different: "You start existing when you are born (when your soul is created), and you never stop existing." The main conditions for a view to be classified as CI is that (1) there is at most one instance of you at any given point in time, and (2) you continue to exist moment after moment.

Closed Individualism
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Closed Individualism
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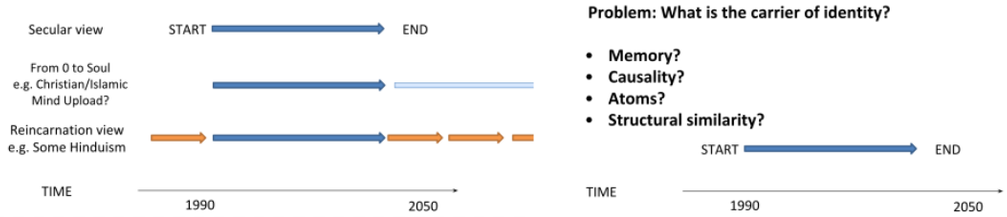
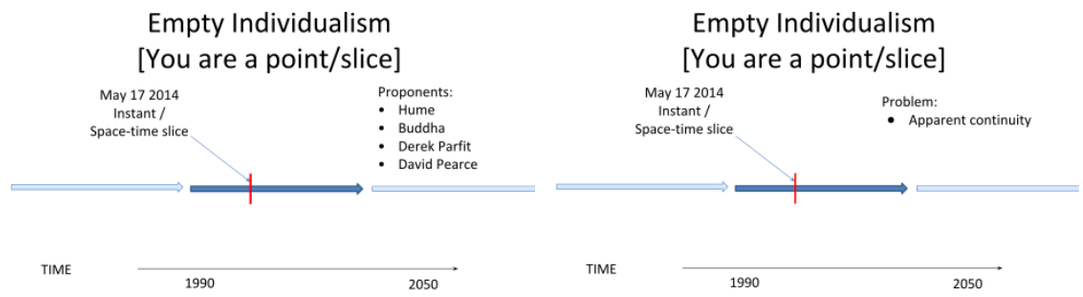


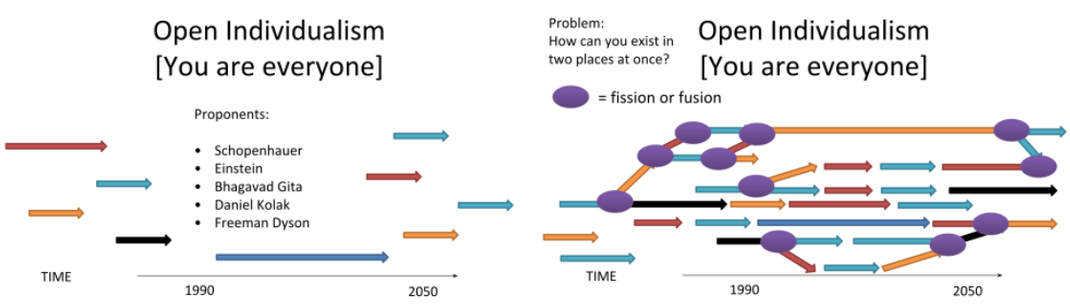
Empty Individualism (EI)

This is the view that you only exist as a time-slice in space-time. For an Empty Individualist, the passage of time is an illusion. At every point in time you are born, you live and you die, all simultaneously. This is not to be confused with eternalism [as opposed to presentism] (also called The Block View of the universe). An Empty Individualist can be a presentist, and in that case he or she believes that one only exists for a unit of time (or an infinitesimally thin space-time cross-section, if time is continuous). This view is very intimately related to Mereological Nihilism. People like David Hume, Derek Parfit and David Pearce believe in this view, as well as many physicalist philosophers. Among the world's classic religions, a notorious example of an EI religion is Buddhism (though this depends on the specific branch).



Open Individualism (OI)

This is the view that there is only one (universal) subject of experience. Alan Watts' would describe it as the realization that we are all "God playing a cosmic game of hide and seek." Every conscious entity may have a distinct form, a distinct personality, and a distinct causal role in the entire universe. But the essence beneath it all is one and the same. Hindu cosmology is often Open Individualist (we are all made of, and resting on, the same ground of being – Brahman). Famous Open Individualists include Einstein and Schopenhauer.



In a future article I will provide the *steel man case* for each of these views. This article, however, is focused on the qualia underlying these views… rather than on their merit as plausible truths.

LSD: The Qualia Evolution Neglected

The most recent neuroimaging study on the effects of LSD reveals that functionally coherent neural circuits break apart when one is high on acid. Unfortunately, I do not think such an explanation will be sufficient to account for the entirely novel kinds of qualia people experience under the influence. David Pearce hypothesizes that the indescribable weirdness of psychedelics is the result of changes in the structures of proteins inside cells. In his view, psychedelics drastically change the intra-cellular signaling of neurons, resulting in changes within the structure of cells. He believes that the textures of qualia are the result of the secondary, tertiary and quaternary structure of proteins in neurons. This is a thoroughly testable hypothesis, and it may even be possible to investigate it in-vitro.

Opponents to this view would point out that the various parts of the brain, such as the visual cortex and the auditory cortex, can be exchanged with little to no functional deficits. Thus we could argue that any part of the cortex is functionally identical; there is one neat trick throughout the entire cortex.

We can reply to this, however, with the claim that unitary consciousness is actually implemented in the thalamus. Hence it matters little that various parts of the cortex can be used interchangeably for the same information processing task: Where we should be looking to find the *one neat trick*, is in the thalamus itself.

Anyhow, LSD and other major psychedelics produce entirely new phenomenologies. Are they short-cuts to enlightenment? Once psychedelic research is instantiated on a large scale again we will probably verify that there are strong parallels between the neurological properties (both in terms of signaling and intra-cellular composition) of *natural* mystical experiences and those induced by psychedelics. Natural selection recruited particular state-spaces of propositional and ontological qualia… spirituality and psychedelics enable us to hack new varieties of it that, so far, have not been useful to increase inclusive fitness.

It Gets Personal

In my personal experience, personal identity views have very distinct subjective qualities. I started my philosophical journey when I was a small kid. At 3 I was informed that every person dies sooner or later, and I remember that this information shocked me very deeply. I did not believe in God, but I still prayed at night "God, I know I can't live forever. At least make me the oldest man on earth!"

Death was a constant subject of dread for me. I experienced several existential crisis at different points in my youth. The two most dreadfiul were: One that lasted a whole year, at the age of 9, and another that lasted about 6 months when I was 13. In both cases I was experiencing fairly constant dysphoria.

Thankfully, I managed to find some comforting interpretation of reality to quench my fear of death. For example, I managed to convince myself that "being dead and being non-existent are both the same state. I have already experienced non-existence, and it was a totally natural state… death cannot be worse than that. Its the most common state for everyone! We only live for a blink of an eye. Thus, to be alive is to be weird. To not exist, is to be in the natural state." I knew these were rationalizations, but the need to reduce my bad existential feelings (i.e. *bad ontological qualia*) was rather severe. I was a Closed Individualist.

At 16 I had a mystical experience. An instance of what is usually talked about as "an oceanic dissolution of one's identity into the ground of being." It was very Hindu-like. Well before I had learned anything about any religion besides Christianity, I experienced something that can only be described as "realizing I'm the universal mind". What happened is that I felt that my consciousness was giving life to my body: It was as if there was this endless ocean of being that was both inside and outside my body. My mind would make it seem as if "I was this body" but that was an illusion. In reality, I was the very ocean of being, and that was everywhere, in everything and in everyone, eternal and immortal.

I experienced a profound sense of relief when I had that experience. It completely transformed my experiential understanding of myself and others. I knew that no experience could be a "proof" for the reality of a particular philosophical view. But I now had at least a proof of concept for how things could be differently. I thought very deeply about the question of personal identity, and how it could be answered philosophically. I considered many thought experiments such as fission, fusion, split-brain, and so on. I realized that, if I am willing to accept that I do exist from one moment after another, then I would have to conclude that I was all of consciousness. I became an Open Individualist.

This experience, and the subsequent change in my beliefs (and thus the modification of my propositional and ontological qualia) drastically reduced, and even eliminated, my fear of death. In retrospect, I am amazed at the depth of my fear of death as a kid. I am not sure if this is common, or whether one needs to also have some sort of hyper-philosophilia in addition (the personality trait of being deeply concerned about philosophical matters at least a large fraction of every single day). I could imagine that, even though I would die and my body would be destroyed along with my memories, what really -fundamentally- mattered about me would never cease to exist. This was profoundly comforting.

Over the years, however, this view has lost some of its appeal. At 21 I started talking with David Pearce, and I realized that there was a somewhat stronger case for Empty Individualism than there was for Open Individualism. OI could be described as a poetic interpretation of reality, but the truth about it was that each unitary element of reality (whether trivial quantum wave-functions or fully developed conscious experiences such as mine) stands on its own, trapped in the Everett multiverse. I have since been in a rather ambiguous state: I experience ontological qualia related to Empty Individualism, Open Individualism, and even Closed Individualism, depending on my mood, my level of empathy, my brain chemistry, and my state of consciousness.

A Deep and Dark Realization

Recently I had one of the worst experiences of my life: After intense contemplation upon the problem of personal identity, and the nature of suffering, my mind temporarily settled with 100% certainty (subjective certainty, that is) into an Empty Individualist interpretation. I realized (in the sense of "experiencing as if true") a state of consciousness that believes without any doubt in the following notions: Mereological Nihilism, Empty Individualism, Eternalism, Hedonic tone realism (that suffering is, truly, bad), Negative Utilitarianism, and a few others I can't remember now. This was awful. I felt that I was stuck in space-time forever. And worse, that reality was incredibly sadistic and unfair: There are countless beings who exist in a state of suffering forever. Whereas with a Closed Individualist or Open Individualist viewpoint one can rationalize suffering as being temporary and "not the whole of the truth," a fully realized Empty Individualist viewpoint does not allow you to make this rationalization. There are beings who, well, exist entirely below hedonic zero. Their whole existence is eternal suffering. Experiencing compassion towards suffering time-slices was painful beyond my usual range of hedonic tone.

Hedonic Tone and Ontological Qualia

The fact that this experience was so bad for me is a strong hint that there is indeed some kind of deep connection between hedonic tone and ontological qualia. But what is the nature of this connection? One hypothesis is that hedonic tone is like a color that "paints ontological qualia." In other words, ontological qualia does not have an intrinsic hedonic tone. Instead, it is due to our particular brain makeup that certain beliefs are felt as good or bad. Thus, positive hedonic tone locally binds (in the phenomenal binding sense) to ontological qualia that suggests that one will survive in a good way, and vice versa. In other words, survival programs may be hijacking one's hedonic coloring of philosophical notions. Since I experienced a fully fleshed out realization of Empty Individualism, my self-model was one of "being in a state of suffering forever without any possible escape, just as a lot of other beings in the multiverse."

If this is so, then we can predict that artificial brains wired differently (either our descendants, or genetically engineered brains) may not necessarily experience the same hedonic tone associated to ontological qualia in the way that we do.

Alternatively, it may be the case that hedonic tone is intrinsic to ontological qualia: Some beliefs about "the nature of reality" may have an intrinsic positive or negative feel.

Moving On Beyond Ontological Distress

I have been fortunate to move on from the very bad state of "absolute belief in Empty Individualism." Recently I had a mind-expanding session in which I focused on feeling intently how different ontological qualia are experienced. The trick was to allow myself to **negate some background assumptions** that were leaving me stuck in a particularly negative configuration of propositional and ontological qualia. What did I do? **I assumed that Mereological Nihilism is false**. This is a very bizarre thing to do. To start, most people are not Mereological Nihilists to begin with. But I suspect that once they have carefully explored this philosophical view, they will generally settle on it being true. It is self-evident once you contemplate it carefully. So negating Mereological Nihilism is a very strange philosophical move. Doable nonetheless. Doable, that is, if one is willing to experience some degree of depersonalization.

There are four ways Mereological Nihilism could be false. The first one is to embrace "Strong Emergence" (the view that collections of simples can somehow make another simple that simultaneously also is a bunch of simples). The second possibility is to negate the boundaries between oneself and the rest of reality. Discreet quantum wave functions will always be able to interfere with each other (even if very, very little), and thus one may be able to conceive of them as one whole being. It may be that our individuality is not ontological; it is an illusion caused by extremely thin, extremely sharp pseudo-boundries between minds. In this Open Individualist view, there are no vertical walls between you and other conscious experiences... only very steep walls that give rise to the illusion of separation. This embodies the very essence of Open Individualism. The third way is to contemplate the possibility of Gunk. Infinitely divisible beings with no ontological unity besides the whole of reality. These three methods require normally-inaccessible ontological qualia. The fourth method requires ontological qualia that is even further away from consensus reality:

Imagine that both "being" and "non-being" are both illusory concepts. In reality, the truth exists beyond being and beyond non-being… beyond logic. Thus, identification with one's "present conscious experience" could be a simple mistake; dualistic ontological qualia, in which things either are or aren't, could be just a very special case of a non-dualistic state-space of possible experiences. This is far out, I know. But the experience of this being the case is actually possible. It requires intense concentration, dedication, and perhaps some brain chemistry modifications.

Experiencing ontological qualia that negates Mereological Nihilism and thus renders Empty Individualism imposible, allowed me to be freed from my *case of bad ontological qualia* (will psychiatrists ever be able to diagnose this problem?). This was the result of contemplating Empty Individualism, and the cure was to contemplate the negation of Mereological Nihilism. I would recommend it to anyone who is suffering as a consequence of that very specific set of beliefs.

Is it possible that what freed me from bad ontological qualia was not, ultimately, the result of simply changing ontological qualia itself? It could also be related, again, to how one's survival programs are implemented with a variety of positive and negative hedonic tones depending on one's beliefs about survival. As we are currently implemented, though, it may be prudent to find ways of experiencing Open Individualistic ontological qualia in a reliable way. If for no other reason than to use it as an anti-depressant.

Reducing Spirituality to Hedonic Tone – and Hedonic Tone to Spirituality

Do we all just seek what feels good at every point in time? This view is called the *pleasure principle* (though I prefer calling it *hedonic tone determinism*). Belief in this view is, paradoxically, strangely dysphoric (at least in my case). At the same time, if this is true, then taking it into account is an important step in order to engage in paradise engineering. People tend to reject this possibility out of hand by coming up with striking counter-examples. For instance, how do we explain arduous and disciplined spiritual practice? Isn't a Hindu or Buddhist monk's first year of practice filled with a lot of loneliness and bodily dysphoria? This can certainly be true. But then again, the strongest source of hedonic tone may be ontological qualia. A person who experiences life as meaningful (say, a self-proclaimed Stoic) can face negative feelings and bodily discomfort. The feelings of meaningfulness compensate for the surface-level negativity. Having a persistent feeling of existential emptiness, on the other hand, is rarely cured by engaging in superficially pleasurable activities.

Remaining agnostic about the ultimate nature of reality, though, leaves me open to alternative interpretations of the nature of hedonic tone. As some mystics have argued, it may be the case that one's degree of pleasure –specially existential spiritual euphoria– is related to one's connection to one's higher self, one's soul or even to God. In this case, hedonic tone would be reduced to spirituality, rather than the other way around. I wouldn't hold my breath, though.

What's the Future of Personal Identity?

As we develop technologies to modify the quality of our consciousness by modifying our genetic source code, gene expression, brain protein composition (the distribution of secondary, tertiary and quaternary protein structures in neurons) and so on, we will begin to explore and catalogue the state-space of possible qualia.

We may be able to disentangle hedonic tone from ontological qualia. If so, then beliefs about personal identity may be just a matter of aesthetics: People with any particular view about reality might be just as unfathomably happy. On the other hand, if ontological qualia has an intrinsic hedonic tone, then we can predict that people in the future will experience the ontological qualia that is the most pleasant. For example, people may end up adopting an Open Individualist viewpoint and rejoice in the extremely long life of the universal collective being (or collective meta-being, which incorporates all views about itself within).

However, personal identity is not only consequential to hedonic tone. The functional and evolutionary consequences of various propositional and ontological qualia cannot be dismissed…

Personal Identity Wars

Beliefs about personal identity have fascinating evolutionary implications. The selection pressures for particular views on personal identity are widely different depending on the details. It is probable that in the future we will experience some sort of memetic warfare: As people begin to explore, induce and recruit exotic varieties of ontological qualia, we will see a lot of new motivations behind the replication of specific varieties of consciousness.

Closed Individualists will arguably continue to be afraid of death. *Afraid* may not necessarily be the right way of putting it. If the Hedonistic Imperative comes to fruition, even Closed Individualists may experience bliss so profound that defies human description. But, they may still not *want to come to terms* with their mortality. Who cares if the entire world is a great place to live when you are not going to be there to experience it?

Empty Individualists will not care very much about who gets to experience what. They will probably lack the motivation to ensure their own "personal" survival. They may, however, have strong aesthetic preferences. And, strikingly, people who have the specific variety of Empty Individualism I call "Type Empty Individualism" (namely, they exist and "are" in perfect copies of themselves rather than just in their unique spatio-temporal instantiation) may want to transform all matter and energy in the universe into perfect copies of themselves. That is, of course, if they value their own existence.

Now, Open Individualists would have a key strategical advantage. Their decision theory would be novel and fascinating: A God's eye view of ethics. They would not care whether their own bodies happen to survive in the future, as long as sentient beings as a whole inhabit blissful, wise and/or novel states of consciousness. Additionally, OIsts would accept radically changing their state of consciousness. Closed Individualists of the psychological criterion type (who believe they exist as long as they share a threshold amount of memories with their future selves) would not be interested in radically changing their states of consciousness. For all they know, that is the same as death. OIsts would do a lot of consciousness research with no worries about death.

Given their strategic advantage, it would then seem that OIsts would win right away. They would quickly become universal allies and do intesne consciousness research. But then we also have to consider second-order effects: Closed Individualists, if sufficiently smart, would be able to anticipate the coming Open Individualist collective super-intelligence that results from their systematic experimentation with consciousness.

Would they wage a preventive war in advance? And would Empty Individualists become allies with Closed Individualists, or would they call for a total annihilation of reality?

Tune in next week, and read: "**Personal Identity Wars II: The Menace of the Utilitronium Shockwave**"

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