

Knowledge of a Person's Future Identity

Thomas W. Smythe

Retired Associate Professor of Philosophy
North Carolina Central University
thomaswsmythe@yahoo.com

Abstract: *This paper compares and contrasts the knowledge we have of our past identity via memory with the knowledge of our future identity via our plans and intentions. We have the identity of persons because people can remember their past selves and remember what their intentions are for their future selves. It is claimed that while we have generally reliable and coherent beliefs about our past selves, our knowledge of our future selves is not as reliable, but that we have privileged epistemic access to our intentions and plans.*

Keywords: *Self; Past; Future.*

Consider the anticipations, aspirations and concerns one has for their future self, and the kind of knowledge, if any, one can be said to have for their future self. One does not have the knowledge of his future identity that they have of their past self. A person can know they are the person who did certain things they remembered doing but there is no comparable basis for knowing what a person will do or be in the future. A person has many true beliefs about what they were like or did in the past, and we attach great importance to this. But we are more apt to talk of a person's hopes, aspirations, plans, desires, wishes, or intentions than their beliefs with respect to their future identity. We attach more importance to what a person wants or intends to do in the future than we do to their beliefs about what they will in fact do.

If one believes they did A in the past, then it follows that they believe that they did A in the past, and from the fact that one believes they will do A in the future, it follows that one believes they are the person who will do A in the future. However, we attach an importance to the reliability of our confident memory beliefs that we do not confer upon our confident beliefs about the future. We attach more importance to what a person wants or intends to do in the future than we do to their beliefs about what they will in fact do. Instead we speak of our intentions, and of course, intentions are not importantly reliable or unreliable the way beliefs are. This is connected with the fact that we have a success use of "to remember" where "I remember doing A" implies that I did A, but there is no analogous success or achievement sense of intention. One usually tries to do what one intends to do, but we expect to have our intentions thwarted sometimes, and we are not surprised when there are intentions that are not carried out when other considerations are more important or when circumstances alter our willingness to try. Our confident memory beliefs are not subject to circumstantial contingencies, and we are often concerned when they turn out to be false.

The concepts of remembering and believing are dissimilar in many interesting respects. To say "I remember going to the store, but I didn't go to the store" is a blatant contradiction, while "I shall go to the store, but I shall not go to the store" is not (the first part of the sentence gives my intention, the second is an estimate of what will happen)¹ It is not self-contradictory to intend to go to the store, but estimate that I shall be prevented from going, the way it is self-contradictory to say I went to the store but I did not. Another important dissimilarity is the ways we can go wrong with respect to intentions and memory beliefs.

In saying "I remember doing X" or "I did X" where 'X' describes a action, one is actually saying that something happened that is describable as my doing X. In saying "I am going to do X" one is really saying that probably something is going to happen describable as my doing X. In both cases it may not be true. In both cases it is generally true that when I say "I did X" (or "I shall do X"), I did X, or I

¹ G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Cornell University Press, 1957, p. 92.

will do X. But the ways I can be wrong about whether I did X and whether I shall do X differ importantly. In saying “I X-ed” I am wrong if I did not do X for some reason such as someone else did X. But I cannot so easily be wrong about whether I intend to do X, since “I intend to do X” makes it clear the I, and not someone else, has the intention. It may turn out that doing X was not my intention because I really didn't intend to X but this is because it is shown that X is not the intentional object or the correct intentional description. So I can be wrong about the object of my intention, but not about whose intention it was. I can discover or decide that it was not my actual intention to do X, but not because I found out that it was someone else's intention instead of mine. If I learn that it is someone else that intends to do X, this information cannot be taken as evidence that it was not me who had the intention. But I can seem to recall X-ing and find out that it was someone else who X-ed, and my learning that someone else X-ed can be evidence for saying that I did not do X.

If we consider our memory beliefs that we did X and compare them to our beliefs that we will X, there is a closer parallel to the future in this respect. If I seem to remember having X-ed, and I am wrong, I cannot be wrong about whether I believe I X-ed rather than someone else, but only about whether I X-ed. Similarly, if I believe I shall X, I cannot be wrong about misidentifying the person who will X, but I can be wrong about whether I will do X.

I am wrong in saying “I X-ed” if what I did is correctly describable as Y, but not as X, and someone else can be in a good position to show that I am wrong. I may seem to remember letting the dog out and my relatives may have observed that I failed to do so, and only succeeded in leaving the door open.

But it is much more difficult for someone to show that I am wrong in saying “I shall X” because it is Y that I intend to do rather than X. One is considered to be in an authoritative position with respect to their own desires, beliefs, intentions, and thoughts. One is said to have privileged epistemic access to their own mental states and their intentional descriptions, but not to their past actions. In seeming to remember I may be hallucinating or imagining, i.e., recalling inaccurately, my past actions, but not my intention to X. In saying “I intend to X” I can be wrong if I am prevented, change my mind, or inadvertently fail to do X and do something else Y. But I cannot be prevented, have a change of mind, or inadvertently fail to have done X.

The different ways of being wrong between remembering and intending brings out the fact that “to intend” is not an epistemic verb the way “to remember” is. To announce, or express, one's intentions is not to make any claim to know anything about the future. Remembering going to the store implies you know that you went, but intending to go to the store has no such implication.

Because our memory beliefs are usually reliable, it follows that a person has knowledge of his past self or identity that is not available to others. However, there is no comparable knowledge of our futures. The knowledge we have of what we shall be or do in the future is at best hypothetical knowledge of our future identity. That is, only if I carry out my plans and intentions to do A will I be reidentifiable as the person who did A. The hypothetical knowledge we have of our future identity does provide us with a kind of basis for identification judgments between our present and future self that is not available to others. However, this basis, since it involves only hypothetical identity judgments about our future self and does not involve claims to know the way remembering does, is much weaker in the case of memory. Our memory knowledge of our past gives us a basis gives us a basis for categorical about who we are that is not available to others. But we have a much weaker basis for making categorical judgments about who we will be in the future. I can have privileged access to my memory beliefs which I have greater access to than others do. I also have superior knowledge of my actual past than others do via my memory beliefs that are caused by perceptions of past events. I do not have such superior access to what I will be or do in the future.

The sense in which we have a knowledge of our future self that is not available to others can be brought out in the following way. The intentional objects of my intentions and memories relevant to personal identity are such things as my personality, bodily appearance, social roles, and significant actions. In terms of social roles, suppose I intend to become a father and a professor, even though I am neither of these now. I will then know the following hypothetical: if my plan to be a father and a professor are realized, I will be the person who has these social roles, since I cannot hope to play a social role the future without also intending to be the same person who will fulfill that role. The role may be to be a father to cultivate certain character traits or go to Europe. Now someone else may find

Knowledge of a Person's Future Identity

that my plans are directed towards the satisfaction or welfare of the man I believe will be a father, professor, and go to Europe and then infer that I myself will be that person. But in my own case, I need not make such an inference, since I can plan to do something only if I regard myself as the person who will do it.

There are important epistemological differences between our knowledge of the identity of others and our knowledge of our own identity. A person can have immediate knowledge without inference or evidence of their own identity when we remember their past history. This is not true for the knowledge we have of others or material things. It is a conceptual or necessary truth to say that our confident memory beliefs are generally true. Thus it is a conceptual truth that each of us has a special way of knowing a coherent picture of their own past history. Let us now ask how much of this knowledge we have of our future selves.

It is generally true that whenever one confidently or sincerely believes or asserts that he will do or become a certain thing in the future, that he will probably do or become those things. However, this is far from being a necessary truth, even when our level of aspiration is realistic, because it is possible to find out inductively whether our beliefs about our future will pan out, whereas it is not possible to find out inductively whether our confident memory claims are usually correct.

First-person memory reports do not have to be grounded on evidence, and we can have immediate, noninferential knowledge of our past identity. It also seems to be the case that statements about our future identity are not usually grounded on evidence or induction. My statement that I will go to a concert this evening does not have to be a conclusion of some statements I have used as evidence that I am the person who will go to the concert. I can know that I intend to go to the concert without knowing anything else. I can have immediate knowledge of what sort of person I am trying to become or of what I intend to do.

To conclude, we can say that there are continuous persons because people are prepared and able to say things that happened in the past belong to their past, and that certain future occurrences will be events that will happen to them. What makes personal identity distinctive is not whether such claims are always true, although they are reliable. There are continuous persons because memory claims and claims about the future can be made of their own histories and intentions whether truly or falsely.

REFERENCE

G.E.M. Anscombe, Intention, Cornell University Press, 1957.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Thomas W. Smythe, earned the Ph.D. in Philosophy in 1971 from the University of Michigan. He has published almost forty articles including in the *Monist*, *Philosophia*, *Philosophical Studies*, and *Philosophical Psychology*.