

Can We Survive Drinking From the River Lethe? **

Abstract

The advocates of the Psychological Account claim that our psychological properties like memory and character traits are essential to us, that we would cease to be if we were to lose them. In this paper I will discuss an undesirable consequence of this widely accepted account, namely, branching. Some of the defenders of the Psychological Account try to solve the branching problem by denying the importance of identity or by denying the existence of three-dimensional objects. I will argue that if we adopt animalism this problem can be solved without giving up such intuitions. I will also claim that we can survive total, irreversible amnesia.

Key Terms

Memory, Amnesia, Animalism, Alzheimer's disease, Psychological Account, John Locke, Derek Parfit, David Lewis.

Lethe'nin Suyunu İçenler Yok Mu Olur?

Özet

Psikolojik Yaklaşım'ı savunanlar hafıza, karakter özellikleri gibi birtakım psikolojik özellikleri kaybetmemiz durumda devamlılığımızın sona ereceğini iddia etmektedirler. Bu yazıda bu oldukça popüler yaklaşımın yol açtığı sorunlardan biri olan dallanma sorununa değineceğim. Psikolojik Yaklaşım'ı savunan bazı felsefeciler bu sorunu özdeşliğin önemini ya da üç boyutlu nesnelere varlığını inkar ederek çözmeye çalışmaktadırlar. Eğer animalizmi kabul edersek dallanma sorununu bu sezgilerden vazgeçmeden de çözebileceğimizi göstermeye çalışacağım. Total, geri dönüşsüz amnezi ortaya çıksa bile devamlılığımızı sürdürebileceğimizi iddia edeceğim.

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Hafıza, Amnezi, Animalizm, Psikolojik Yaklaşım, Alzheimer, John Locke, Derek Parfit, David Lewis.

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“You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all, just as intelligence without the possibility of expression is not really an intelligence. Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing”.¹

says the renowned Spanish director Luis Buñuel, in his semiautobiography *My Last Breath*.

I felt the same way when my grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease eight years ago. In the early stages of the disease she was just suffering from some forgetfulness and had problems with abstract thinking. Then we started observing changes in her personality. As the disease advanced she stopped reading her books and seeing her friends and became disoriented about time and place. She had no clue who she was and who the people around her were. That is when I started asking myself whether this being who was sitting on my grandmother’s chair, playing with toys all day was the same being who used to be interested in philosophy and enjoyed talking about politics.

Were the psychological properties like memory and character traits she has lost essential to her? If they were, assuming essentialism, it would imply that she has ceased to be. Most of the philosophers I read on the subject including Locke, Hume, Parfit, Shoemaker seemed to be holding this view, referred to as the Psychological Account in the literature. They claimed that Luis Buñuel, Albert Einstein, Frank Sinatra, Michael Jordon, Van Gogh, my grandmother, you, me are most fundamentally persons, beings with psychological and mental properties. We go out of existence when we stop being persons. That is to say, our persistence consists in some psychological relation such as continuity of mental contents or capacities.

The most prominent supporter of this view, John Locke claims that we survive as long as we remain persons. He has defined a person as “a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and it seems to me, essential to it”.² Being the same person, on the other hand, means “the same consciousness extending to actions past and to come”. Thus, on Locke’s picture, persons must be thinkers, intelligent beings, and they also must be capable of transtemporal self reference. Consciousness, as understood in these terms, is essential to thinking, hence it is an essential part of what he means by person. Without the continuity of consciousness, consciousness of what is past we cannot talk about a person. How can we be conscious of the past? Not through sense experience but through memory. That is to say, Locke’s person has to be able to form true sentences of the form “I was the one who took you to school every morning when

¹ Buñuel 1994: 4-5.

² Locke, 1694, Book II, Chapter XXVII, 9.

you were in second grade". Thus he cannot survive drinking from the river Lethe, Alzheimer's disease or lapsing into a persistent vegetative state³.

Similarly on the Shoemaker-Parfit account, identity⁴ consists in psychological continuity with respect to mental contents, i.e., memories, interests, talents, character traits. The account, roughly, is this: If you are psychologically continuous with x with respect to mental contents you are identical with him. Psychological continuity is defined by Parfit as holding of overlapping chains of strong connectedness. Psychological connectedness, on the other hand, is holding of direct psychological connections. As opposed to psychological continuity, psychological connectedness is not a transitive relation and it can hold in degrees. That is, x today is strongly connected with y yesterday if he can remember at least half of what he experienced then, if he can act according to his intentions and/or fulfill his desires. Hence one can be psychologically continuous with a past being years ago even if he is not strongly connected to it.⁵

If I can remember how I celebrated my last birthday with all the details, what I was wearing, who were there at the party, what kind of a cake we had, I am psychologically connected to that being a year ago. I may, however, fail to remember the similar details relating to my 10th birthday. Yet if I remember a time, say, my 12th birthday when my parents took me to Disneyland, when I remembered my 10th birthday I can still be considered to be psychologically continuous with the past being who is celebrating her 10th birthday. Again on this version of the account too one cannot survive total amnesia.

There are many modern versions of the Psychological Account. They all claim that we need to retain some psychological property to survive. As plausible as it seems and as widely accepted as it is the Psychological Account has surprising consequences. In this work I will try to show how this view leads to very odd consequences like the branching problem. Some defenders of the Psychological Account like Derek Parfit give up the importance of identity to solve this problem. Others like David Lewis adopt a perdurantist account identity. My aim is to show that we can still argue that identity is what matters, that we endure through time and avoid branching if we adopt animalism, the view which claims that any kind of psychological continuity is neither necessary nor sufficient for our persistence through time. I will argue that we can survive total irreversible amnesia, survive a case of oblivion caused by a draft of the river of forgetfulness, Lethe.

The Branching Problem

Imagine the following scenario. Elizabeth is a dancer with the National Ballet and she is driving towards the Opera House. Helen who is a professor of physics is

³ A patient in a persistent vegetative state suffers from an irreversible and complete loss of consciousness.

⁴ In this paper, by "identity" I will be referring to numerical identity. The question I will be dealing with is whether one thing picked out at one time and another thing picked out at another time are one and the same thing or not. I will also assume that identity is absolute.

⁵ See Parfit 1984: 204-7 and Shoemaker 1984: 90 for detailed discussion of their account.

driving in the same direction; she has tickets for the performance Elizabeth will be dancing in. The young ballerina, realizing she is about to be late, does not stop at a red light and crashes into Helen's car. A couple of days later, when she regains consciousness in a hospital room, she sees that she is surrounded by people she has never seen before. All around her are unknown faces who are calling her Helen. Her body feels strange too, she feels heavier, taller and older. She then notices that her wedding ring is missing, her hand looks very unfamiliar and on her wrist is a band which says 'Helen Sup'. In panic, she asks for a mirror. Looking at it she comes across a totally unfamiliar face, the face of some strange woman. In the next room, a similar incident takes place. Helen looks in the mirror to see some other woman's face. Both women call out for the doctor hoping he will tell them they are hallucinating. The doctor asks the nurses to bring both patients into his office. The moment they see each other they experience another shock; they see in the other person what used to be their face and body. After trying to cool them down the doctor explains the bizarre situation. It turns out that in the car crash the cerebrums⁶ of both Helen and Elizabeth were severely damaged and they were both removed for C-Repair, a process which repairs the damaged cerebral tissue. However, after the repair, due to the carelessness of one of the nurses, they were put into the wrong skulls. Now which of the two women is Elizabeth and which one of them is Helen?

Discussions on personal identity through time are usually based on similar stories and puzzles. The philosophers who argue that Elizabeth and Helen went where their cerebrums did are referred to as the advocates of the Psychological Account. This view strikes us as very plausible. Let us assume you are Helen's brother, the doctors have just explained to you what has happened, and then you have visited both of the patients, in which room will you say your sister is? In the room where someone is staying who looks and sounds very different than her but who remembers you, the things you did together, talks about her students and work? Or in the other room where there is someone who looks and sounds exactly like your sister but claims she has never seen you before, has no recollection of the things Helen did and liked? I assume you would say your sister Helen is where her cerebrum is and continue visiting the patient who has her cerebrum but someone else's body rather than the one who has her body and someone else's cerebrum. This all seems very plausible.

Now imagine this following scenario. Your cerebrum is removed, the nerve fibers connecting the two hemispheres are cut and each of the hemispheres is implanted into two (empty) skulls. There are many patients who go under hemispherectomy and continue to live with either one of their cerebral hemispheres. Hardly anyone claims that if you were to undergo hemispherectomy you would cease to be. The resulting person would have some impairment but would be psychologically continuous with you, would remember your past, recognize your friends.⁷

Accordingly, since under those hypothetical circumstances two hemispheres are implanted into two skulls, two people would be psychologically continuous with the

⁶ The organ responsible for all higher brain activity such as memory and reasoning.

⁷ For more on patients who underwent hemispherectomy see Puccetti 1973: 352-54. He talks about a patient whose left hemisphere was removed. He underlines the fact that she could speak excellently, she walked well, and wrote fluently with her right hand.

original person. Now which one of the offshoots — call them Harry and Henry — is you? Since identity is a one-one relation you cannot be numerically identical with both of them. Saying “You survive as one but not the other” is also highly problematic. There is no reason why you would be identical to the offshoot who got your right hemisphere but not the one who received your left one. The only other alternative is to say that you do not survive at all. Parfit and Unger are advocates of this view. Parfit also goes on to say that identity is not what matters. You do not survive but (a) being(s) which is psychologically continuous with you, who enjoys the music you used to enjoy, who remembers your past, who can continue with your work, loves your children, does. This is as good as survival.⁸ Controversial as it is, this is a valid solution to the branching problem. I will come back to Parfit’s solution and the problems it creates in the following section.

On the other hand, arguing that you cease to exist because there are two beings psychologically continuous with you reduces identity to an extrinsic relation. If your right hemisphere was transplanted into a skull and left hemisphere was destroyed you would be identical with the offshoot who received your right hemisphere. On the other hand, if both hemispheres were transplanted you would cease to be. In other words, whether you will survive and will be identical to the offshoot who has received one of your hemispheres depends solely on what happens to your left hemisphere. If it is destroyed you survive, if it also gets transplanted you cease to exist. That is to say, what happens to the other hemisphere makes a difference in our identity judgments about you. This is an undesirable consequence which can be avoided if one adopts a perdurantist account of existence. I will try to explain how.

One of the proponents of this view, David Lewis solves the fission problem by referring to temporal parts. He argues that there is no branching in the fission cases. The act of removing hemispheres and placing them into two different skulls does not create two people, Harry and Henry. What appears to be one person is actually two people with a single body. These two people, Harry and Henry, share their temporal stages until fission takes place, and then they are separated. To put it in different words, he argues that there were already two non-identical people before fission took place.⁹

I will try to clarify this position. There were two people, Harry and Henry, in a single body and a single mind until the operation during which the brain surgeons separated them. That is to say, they are two people at t_1 because of what will happen to them in the future, because they will be separated at t_2 . Parfit, when criticizing Lewis’ position, draws an analogy between the branching cases and East and West Germany. He points out that saying there were two people in a single body before the operation is analogous to claiming that East and West Germany were different nations even before 1945.¹⁰ Because of what happened in 1945, we were dealing with x_1 and x_2 in the year 1936. In other words, Lewis is committed to saying that the future can affect the past. This strikes many of us as false.

⁸ See Parfit 1984, Chapter 12 for his discussion of why identity does not matter.

⁹ For more on this view see Lewis 1976.

¹⁰ See Parfit 1976: 96.

Lewis' theory also has problems explaining ordinary cases, cases in which there is no fission. In the fission case, two people start with a single body, single mind and share temporal parts until time t_2 when they are separated. What happens to ordinary single people who are born and die with their cerebrum? No brain surgery. No fission. No fusion. Are we going to count them in a strange way too? The perdurantist account regards people who do not undergo fission as one. This appears to be very counterintuitive. I will try to explain why.

Let us consider two hypothetical patients staying at the same hospital, in the very same room waiting for fission and call them Sam and Brad. Let us also assume we have a god's eye point of view, i.e., that we can see the whole of these patients from the day of their coming into existence until their death. This enables us to see that Brad will be chosen for fission, both of his hemispheres will be successfully implanted into two skulls and both of the offshoots will lead healthy lives. We can also see that after carefully viewing Sam's test results the doctors will tell him that he is not suitable for fission, will send him home and he will live for another twelve years. So at t_1 , that is, before Brad's fission and before Sam was told he was not going to go through the same operation, if I enter their room I am in the company of three people. They both look like ordinary, single people to me, however, in reality, because of what Brad will go through at t_2 he is, in fact, two people at the time I visit them.

Let me try to apply the problem to Parfit's case of Germany in order to underline the absurdities which arise when one adopts a perdurantist view to avoid branching. Let us assume that France and Germany signed a pact on October 6th 1934. Because of what will happen to Germany in 1945, the sentence "France signed a pact with a country on October 6th 1934" would be wrong. We would have to say "France signed a pact with *two* countries..." Germany was two countries at the time the contract was signed because of what it was going to undergo in the year 1945 and Brad was two people as a child because of what was going to happen to him in his late 30s.

The advocates of perdurantism claim that the reason why we find such results very counter-intuitive is because of our misconception of persons and other beings enduring through time. Once we reject the commonsense view of endurance and construct the entity over time in their fashion, there may be a sense in which France may have signed a pact with two countries in 1934 and Brad may have consisted of two people even before the operation. This is a valid point. For all we know, we may be mistaken about the existence of entities through time and the perdurantists may be right. It is a coherent position and avoids the branching problem but at the price of denying the existence of three dimensional objects.

How can Branching be Avoided?

However, perdurantism is not the only theory which can avoid the undesirable branching I have discussed above. I hold that we human beings, unlike events, endure through time, that we are not extended in time. I also hold that identity is a one-one relationship, that it cannot be one-many or many-one. The perdurantist claims that one cannot adopt both of these views, that an endurantist must accept that identity can be one-many because of the branching problem. It is not necessarily so. The premise which

leads to the branching problem is the following one: 'Identity consists in some psychological relation, i.e., continuity of memory, character traits, etc.' This is the main premise of the Psychological Account. If we give that up we can be endurantists and still avoid the branching problem. I will try to show how.

Let us return to the hemispherectomy case. Brad is lying on his hospital bed and is about to go through fission. Now let us ask the same question 'Which one of the offshoots will be him?' The answer is 'None'. Since identity has nothing to do with psychological continuity none of the people who receive his hemispheres will be identical to him. After the operation Brad will still be there sleeping in his bed. This approach is called animalism. Animalism treats hemispherectomy in the same way it treats kidney removal and transplant. If Brad were to give his kidneys to two different people he would not cease to be himself, he would just need to be connected to a dialysis machine until he gets a new kidney(s). Moreover, the people who receive each of his kidneys would not be identical to him. Since animalism does not attribute a special status to the brain and treats it the same way it treats other organs, kidneys, hearts, livers or lungs, its removal does not result in the destruction of Brad. He survives the operation.

One might think that since he has no brain left, he is dead, that he is only a corpse. It is true that Brad lacks the capacity for a sentient and conscious life. He cannot solve any problems, speak, he cannot communicate with the people around him. However, the lack of these psychological properties would not suffice to call him a corpse. His biological life is not disturbed. He can breathe, his heart can pump blood, he can digest food. The conditions for organic life \cong absorption, excretion, metabolism, growth and reproduction \cong are all satisfied. Therefore, he is not a corpse. He is alive in the sense lady bugs, sea horses, bushes are alive.

Returning to the branching problem, as I have tried to show above, an animalist can adopt an endurantist view and still argue that identity is a one-one relation.

Identity is What Matters

As I have mentioned above, to avoid branching some supporters of the Psychological Account, Derek Parfit for one, have denied that numerical identity is what matters. Identity is a one to one relationship. I cannot be identical to more than one being. That is why the branching problem is created. However you and I can be psychologically continuous with and connected to two or even more beings. I will try to illustrate how. Let us reconsider the case I have described in the previous section. A patient checks into a hospital. For practical purposes let us call him Patient. He goes through an operation during which one of his cerebral hemispheres is removed and is transplanted into an empty skull.

Let Donor rigidly designate the patient who comes back to his room having donated one of his hemispheres and Recipient rigidly designate the patient who has received it. Recipient is psychologically continuous with the Patient; he can recognize

his friends, enjoy listening to his favorite music remember his plans for the future.¹¹ So does Donor. He may initially have some difficulty walking, talking and writing. He may have to relearn all these abilities.¹² However, he will have Patient's memories and psychological features.

Since identity is a one-to-one relationship neither one of the offshoots is numerically identical with Patient but they are both psychologically continuous with him. To put it in other words, Patient did not survive the operation, because there are now two entities psychologically continuous with him. Since identity is a one to one relationship this is not acceptable. He has ceased to be and has been replaced by two successors. Parfit claims this is as good as ordinary survival.¹³ Both Donor and Recipient will continue with Patient's work, they will spend time with his family and friends, continue to enjoy all the things he used to enjoy.

Furthermore, if we look at it in a certain way, it may even be better than ordinary survival because Donor and Recipient will have twice as much time to donate to Patient's work, family, friends and hobbies. It will be like doubling of the years to be lived. For Parfit, this —what he calls Relation R— is what matters. Relation R is defined as psychological connectedness and/or continuity. As opposed to identity, which is an all or nothing relationship, Relation-R can come in degrees. I may be strongly connected to some future being who receives my whole cerebrum, somewhat connected to one who receives one of cerebral hemispheres and remotely connected to one who receives half of one hemisphere.

In another hypothetical scenario, the being I am strongly connected to can also look exactly like me. I enter into what Parfit calls a "teletransporter", a machine which destroys me and records the exact state of my cells.¹⁴ This information is forwarded to another machine on Mars which using organic material makes a copy of me. This being created on Mars remembers everything about my life until the moment I walked into the Teletransporter and, moreover looks, sounds and behaves exactly like me. Parfit believes that there is no reason why we should not accept this operation, not see it as a form of traveling.

¹¹ The two hemispheres function in different ways however, in most cases, after hemispherectomy the remaining hemisphere takes over the tasks that were controlled by the side that was removed.

¹² Studies show that in 70% of cases of hemispherectomy speech and writing return. The missing half is replaced by marrow fluid and the brain eventually recovers from this catastrophic loss. There are even recorded cases of patients who have recovered the ability to be fluent in more than one language — the languages they spoke before the operation.

¹³ Parfit 1984: 261.

¹⁴ Teletransportation (or teleportation) is the process of moving objects from one place to another by encoding information about an object, transmitting the information to another place, such as on a radio signal, and creating a copy of the original object in the new location. The use of teleportation as a means of transport for humans still has considerable unresolved technical and philosophical issues, such as exactly how to record the human body sufficiently accurately and also be able to reconstruct it, and whether destroying a human in one place and recreating a copy elsewhere would provide a sufficient experience of continuity of existence. Religious people wonder if the soul is copied or destroyed, and might even consider it murder. For a detailed discussion see Parfit 1984: Chapter 10.

At first sight, all this seems very counterintuitive. You may not like the idea of some being, which is not you, finishing your book, spending time with your spouse and children, walking on the surface of Mars, making new friends. However, Parfit points out that being R-Related to at least one future being is much better than total annihilation. For him, there are two ways in which you can lose your identity: by dying and by dividing— donating your cerebral hemispheres, being cloned, copied, teletransported. While the first one means total annihilation, the latter results in at least one being which is psychologically continuous with you. He claims it is irrational to think that this option is as bad as ordinary death.¹⁵ If we take the community context into account and consider teletransporting people like Gandhi, Mandela, Atatürk, Martin Luther King, Parfit's point may seem more valid. We may all prefer these people teletransported rather than dead.

Under some circumstances, for us too, having offshoots which will continue our work may be preferable to death. You and I may rather undergo fission, teletransportation or cloning than die an ordinary death. With the same instinct, you — before the operation — may be very concerned about the patient who will receive your cerebrum. You may want him/her to have a comfortable life and not at all be concerned about what will happen to the brainless human being which the operation leaves in persistent vegetative state. The advocates of the Psychological Account take this lack of concern to show that you go where your cerebrum, in other words, where your psychological properties, goes. You do not care as much about what will happen to the brainless animal. Therefore, you are not identical to it.

This is not a very convincing argument. As Parfit has shown us, you may be very concerned about an offshoot you are psychologically connected to but who is not numerically identical to you, i.e., somebody who has one or more of your cerebral hemispheres, who has somehow inherited your psychological properties. It looks like concern does not always follow identity.

Just as it is conceivable \neq and may even be rational \neq to be concerned about a being which is not identical to you, you may also not care about something which is in fact identical to you. I will try to explain how. Let us imagine you are given some kind of medical proof that we are identical to PVS patients, that if we were to lapse into such a state identity would still be preserved. Knowing that you will be identical to it you can still say that you are not at all concerned about someone in a persistent vegetative state. You can put in your will your desire to be disconnected from all the machines and let die if this were to happen. For instance, you can say "I do not want to be kept alive under the circumstances in which I no longer am able to experience any joy, recognize my loved ones and communicate with them". Under some circumstances, concern and identity may not always go together. Since your lack of concern is no proof that you are not identical to a PVS patient, your concern for the offshoots which would be R-related

¹⁵ Ibid., 261.

to you does not indicate that you are identical to them. In other words, your concern for them fails to show that animalism is wrong.¹⁶

Moreover, these are all practical questions, ethical concerns about future beings which will be qualitatively identical to you—will look, sound like you, have your eye colour etc.-or bear a strong psychological resemblance to you—will enjoy reading your favorite writer, will react to happiness the way you do, will remember the things you have experienced, and so on. I think we need to separate these questions from questions about numerical identity. The question of persistence is a question about numerical identity and, as we have seen above, these two kinds of identity do not always entail each other.

Animalism, since it is not faced with a branching problem, does not need to deny the importance of numerical identity, invent a new relation like Relation-R and appeal to a concept of prudential concern to support it. According to animalism, I was a human foetus, then a human baby, and a human child. Now I am a human adult. If one day I suffer from a severe cerebral trauma or donate my cerebrum I may become a human vegetable. Numerical identity holds between all these beings. On the other hand, my replica on Mars who would look like me, remember my childhood, enjoy my favorite symphony, would not be me. The moment the teletransporter destroys me I would cease to exist and a new entity qualitatively identical to me would come into being in Mars.

This operation may lead to interesting ethical questions about me and my replica. However, as I have underlined several times, having a replica is not what matters in survival. Identity is.

Animalism and Alzheimer's Disease

In this paper I have tried to show that the Psychological Account which claims that we cannot survive loss of our mental contents and capacities leads to a branching problem. To avoid branching some philosophers give up the idea that three-dimensional objects endure through time. Some claim that identity is not what matters.

Animalism, on the other hand solves the branching problem without giving up these intuitions. It is also compatible and consistent with recent developments in neuroscience and the medical breakthroughs in neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's. I will try to explain why. Alzheimer's disease is a "progressive degenerative disease of the brain accompanied by cognitive and functional deficits, as well as behavioral and affective disturbances."¹⁷

A human adult gets Alzheimer's disease. Several biological and abnormal cognitive changes in memory and learning take place as the disease progresses. Since the nerve cells, especially those that are involved in processing memory, are attacked and finally killed, the patient cannot recover. They cannot wake up one day and start

¹⁶ See Olson 1997: 56 where he makes a similar point and says, "So once we admit that one's prudential concern need not be concern for oneself, it ought to come as no surprise if the Biological Approach is true.

¹⁷ Herskovits 1995: 147.

talking to their friends. An end-stage Alzheimer's patient's memories and mental capacities are not only inaccessible but they are erased. The amnesia Alzheimer's patients suffer from is similar to a case of total oblivion caused by a draft of the river of forgetfulness, Lethe. Under these circumstances the memories are irreversibly lost.

As opposed to the people who drink waters of Lethe and lose their memories only, Alzheimer's patients also lose their mental capacities. Although early symptoms of this disease are only lapses of memory, sleep disorders, inability to cope with even small amounts of money, mood swings, paranoid delusions, difficulty in motor coordination, organizing thoughts, concentration and communication, eventually all systems get damaged. Gradually the nerve cells die, shrivel and disappear. As a result of this, end-stage Alzheimer's patients suffer from profound memory loss and significant loss of ability in daily living. They need constant supervision and assistance with eating and getting dressed. They are unable to solve problems of any level and are disoriented to time, place and the people around them. Finally they become bedridden, incontinent and in great need of permanent care. That why some refer to Alzheimer's disease as "a funeral without an end" or "the death before death".¹⁸

However, no study suggests that during the course of the disease, when full-blown Alzheimer's symptoms become evident, i.e., when psychological properties such as memory and character traits are lost, an entity goes out of existence. Under normal circumstances, the human adult who showed the first symptoms of the Alzheimer's some years ago eventually dies of the disease. Some studies even suggest that what we call Alzheimer's may just be a quantitatively extreme form of an essentially normal age-related state rather than a qualitatively pathological state.¹⁹ Herskovits claims that an Alzheimer's patient is a full human although he lacks autonomy and self control. She even goes on to say that "perhaps most radical in its restoration of the humanity of the person diagnosed with Alzheimer's is the suggestion that AD is a mode or mechanism for becoming more healthily and authentically human".²⁰

Thus I want to conclude that none our psychological properties are essential to us, humans. We can suffer from irreversible memory loss as well as loss of capacity for any kind of psychological life yet remain human. What we call dementia or Alzheimer's disease now may just be a stage of human life, perhaps a second childhood.

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¹⁸ Ibid., 148.

¹⁹ Drachman 1983.

²⁰ Herskovits 1995:156.

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