Saying ‘I Do’ to Identity
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Abstract

The only sensible solution to the mind-body problem is a type-type identity theory. I wish to argue for a version of Type-Type identity theory that withstands the usual seemingly fatal objections, which I call ‘R-Type Identity Theory’ and which has three claims. First, an identity theory does not entail ‘reducing’ or ‘eliminating’ one set of things to or in favor of another set of things and introduces epidentity (treating identified relata as distinct). Secondly, pain and what-it-is-like to be in pain are distinguishable and introduces frigid stipulation (a pragmatic rather than semantic property by which we stipulate reference). Finally there may be more than one type of mental state in question and introduces subtypes (a pained brainless Martian is evidence that their state is a pain subtype). With the standard objections to identity theory taken care of we are free to embrace the only truly satisfying, non-Cartesian, philosophy of mind.

It is my belief that everyone secretly wants to be an identity theorist, by which I mean the theory that types of brain-states are identical to types of mental-states. It solves the mind-body problem, fits with what science tells us, and explains how we can know about other minds; in short, it solves many of the hardest problems in the philosophy of mind. In fact I think that most scientist secretly already hold this view. It is the theory that seems to me to underlie all brain-wave recording and brain imaging studies. Despite this, it is considered somewhat naïve by philosophers due to a series of devastating arguments that emerged at the close of the last century. These, of course, are the knowledge argument given by Jackson, the zombie argument given by Chalmers, the modal argument given by Kripke, the multiple realizability argument given by Putnam, and the autonomy arguments of Davidson and Fodor. Under pressure from these arguments it has become common wisdom at this point in the history of philosophy that type-type identity theories are just plain wrong and that the only viable physicalist theory left is one of a functional kind that endorses token identities.
Today I would like to introduce a type of identity theory that withstands these objections. I call it ‘R-Type Identity Theory,’ and it has three main claims. The first is that an identity theory does not entail ‘reducing’ or ‘eliminating’ one set of things to or in favor of another set of things and introduces what I call an epidentity. The second is that pain and what-it-is-like to be in pain are distinguishable and introduces what I call frigidity. The third is that there may be more than one type of mental state in question and introduces subtypes\(^1\). Since this is meant to serve only as an introduction I will briefly go through each.

So, what is an epidentity? One makes such a claim when one asserts that A and B are identical but implicitly treats A and B as distinct. Sometimes an epidentity can be useful. This is mostly due to the opacity of identity. For instance A sharp and B flat name the same note\(^2\) and Clark Kent and Super Man name the same person. But yet it remains useful to treat them as distinct. Anyone can tell you that Clark wears glasses, Superman doesn’t. Louis is in love with Superman and not with Clark. Clark works at the Daly Planet, Superman doesn’t. Superman flies, not Clark! Likewise when learning scales one is told that the B major scale contains A sharp, not B flat and that the A flat major scale contains B flat and not A sharp. But if pushed we would have to say that Superman does wear glasses and work at the Daly Planet and that Louis is in love with Clark, who can fly. B flat is in the B major scale. Since the terms ‘Clark Kent’ and ‘Superman’ refer to the same individual and ‘B flat’ and ‘A sharp’ name the same note, what is true of one is true of the other.

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\(^1\) I would like to thank Chris Viger for suggesting this terminology

\(^2\) I here ignore the complication of temperament
In fact this very language tempts us into the epidentity. This temptation was noted by Russell in his Lectures on Logical Atomism. He says

Identity is rather puzzling at first sight. When you say ‘Scott is the author of *Waverly’*, you are half tempted to think that there are two people, one of whom is Scott and the other the author of *Waverly*, and they happen to be the same. That is obviously absurd, but that is the sort of way one is tempted to deal with identity. (Russell 1985, p 115)

There is not one and the other; there is just one. The relation of identity is that relation that holds between something and itself and no other thing. The terms that flank the identity sign must refer to the very same entity. It does not make sense to say that Superman has properties that Clark doesn’t or that A sharp is in scales that B flat is not. But we can treat them as though they are distinct as long as we acknowledge that in doing so we have switched from identity to epidentity.

It is in violating this principle that we commit the Fallacy of Epidentity. A perfect example of this is Davidson’s Anomalous Monism. He claims the identity of mental and physical events but then also claims that they have distinct properties. But if the identity claim is true then there is only one thing there and all of the properties of that thing will be its properties. Now, when we say that a mental event is identical with a physical event we mean that all its properties are physical. There are not two things there, the mental event and the physical event, with separate properties. There is, and if the identity is true can be, only one thing, the mental/physical event with its properties. In epidentical terms the properties of the one are the very same as the properties of the other. But this is just what Davidson denies. He wants to have the identity while maintaining that the mental and the physical have distinct properties and this just makes no sense, unless we acknowledge that we have switched to an epidentity. Just as there are not two things, one
Clark Kent and the other Superman, there are not two things, one the mind and the other the brain. Rather there is only one thing: the mind/brain.

Any one who thinks that an identity theorist leaves out distinctive mental properties commits a version of this fallacy. They are treating the mental and physical as distinct, which just fails to take the identity theory seriously. There being no mental properties that aren’t physical is just what the identity theory claims. But this is not to say that we have reduced the mental to the physical. There is no reducing of the mental to the physical there is only the equation of the mental and the physical. We do not reduce Superman to Clark Kent or A sharp to B flat. Nor do we define Superman in terms of Clark Kent. We equate them. We find out that information about the one is also information about the other. To use a familiar metaphor, we are to merge our Super Man and Clark Kent files. Finding out that mental states are brain states tell us that we should ‘merge our files’ on them but the identity of the files need not be lost in the merge. It may still be useful to treat them as distinct.

Now on to the second claim of R-Type Identity Theory. As commonly understood Kripke’s notion of rigidity is a property that some terms have and that others lack. I argue that there is no such property that is had by some terms and lacked by others; hence there is no rigidity as commonly construed. Recent discussions of rigidity have, I claim, forgotten the importance that stipulation plays in Kripke’s original account. In short the argument is that the truth-conditions of sentences with supposed rigid designators in them can vary depending on the stipulative act of the speaker. But if rigidity were a property of the terms themselves the truth-conditions should not vary! I introduce the notion of frigidity, which is not a property that terms have, but something that we do and is a tool
that we use to evaluate counter-factuals. We decide to ‘freeze’ the referent of a term and then try to evaluate counter-factual statements in terms of the constant referent. The freezing is accomplished by a stipulative act on the part of the speaker. Another way to put the point is that whereas rigidity is a semantic property, frigidity is a pragmatic property.

Thus it follows that there are two ways to perform the thought experiment of frigid stipulation corresponding to taking one or the other terms flanking the identity sign as frigid and asking ‘what about that in another possible world?’ We decide that we are going to stipulate, trivially as Kripke says, that we want to find out about X in a possible world. So for water=H2O we can ask ‘what if H2O, this very chemical substance, was in a world that was different from ours?’ If it turns out that H2O is not ‘watery’ that is OK. We can then also ask ‘what about water? Stuff that acts like this, fills our lakes and etc? What if we found a world that had watery stuff that was not H2O?’ And that is OK as well. However Kripke (Kripke 1980) makes the claim that when it comes to mental kinds we cannot do this because in the case of pains and whatnot their properties are not separable in this way.

But once we switch from rigidity to frigidity this is less obvious. We can hold the brain state frigid and ask ‘what is it like to have this brain state in a world that is different from ours?’ It may turn out that that very brain state is not like anything to have at all. On the other hand we can hold the sensation of pain frigid and ask questions about worlds with that sensation. It certainly seems logically possible that some of those worlds will have that sensation and yet not have any brain states at all! This is just what Kripke’s objection to the identity theory is. He says “this notion seems to me self-evidently absurd.
It amounts to the view that the very pain I now have could have existed without being a mental state at all,” (p.147). Well, yes this is true if what he means is that the very brain state he is in and which is his pain might have existed but was not painful for the creature that had it. This is to do no more than admit that there might exist an unfelt pain. He is wrong if he means that a pained creature, one that felt pain, would not be in pain.

This only seems absurd, as pointed out by David Rosenthal (Rosenthal 1986), if one is caught in the grip of a Cartesian theory of mind. This certainly seems true of Kripke in so far as he believes that pain and how it feels to be pained are obviously one and the same thing. A convincing case can be made that pain is one thing and what it is like to have the pain another. For instance consider, as Rosenthal does, the familiar case of someone who says ‘I’ve had a backache all day.’ We do not really expect that this person has had a backache at every point in the day. It is more reasonable to think that they have had an ache that they have been more or less aware of all day. At some points the person may be intensely focused on writing philosophy and not even aware that they are in pain at all. Or consider more complicated data from the anesthesia literature. Under some forms of anesthesia patients report feeling pain even though it was not painful. That is they recognize and classify the feeling as pain but deny that it hurts! And let’s not forget the dental pain phenomena. What is so striking about this phenomenon is that the patient has the very same experience but at one time says it is painful and at another time says that it isn’t! Lastly, consider the eastern mystic. What is it that they are meditating to ignore? It certainly is conceivable that a mystic who walks across hot coals has a pain that he simply is not aware of. Once this type of move is made the Cartesian thesis of transparency reveals itself and the onus falls on the shoulders of the objector to re-
motivate it. The absurdity that Kripke is afraid of is nothing more than the fact that the brain state he is in might not have been like anything to be in and this brings us to the final claim of R-Type Identity Theory.

How can we accommodate the intuition that there may exist pain that is not a brain state? The answer I propose is that there may be more than one type of the thing in question. The idea that there may be more than one kind of a thing is not as strange as it sounds. Kripke suggests this in a variety of places in *Naming and Necessity*. For instance when discussing tigers he says

> Since we have found out that tigers do indeed, as we suspected, form a single kind, then something not of this kind is not a tiger. Of course, we may be mistaken in supposing that there is such a kind. In advance, we suppose that they probably do form a kind. Past experience has shown that usually things like this, living together, looking alike, mating together, do form a kind. If there are two kinds of tigers that have something to do with each other but not as much as we thought, then maybe they form a larger biological family. If they have absolutely nothing to do with each other, then there are really two kinds of tigers. This all depends on the history and on what we actually find out. (p 121)

He makes the same point again when discussing gold. He says “if…the supposition that there is one uniform substance or kind in the initial sample [of gold] proves [to be] radically in error, reactions can vary: sometimes we may declare that there are two kinds of gold, sometimes we may drop the term ‘gold’,” (p 136). These other types I call subtypes. A subtype is a group that forms a type within a larger type.

As an illustration consider the identity of water and H20. What this should mean is that any sample of water is a sample of H20 but it turns out that this is not the case. In any sample of water there is mostly H20 but there are also small amounts of what is known as D20 and HD0. These compounds contain deuterium, a naturally occurring isotope of hydrogen that has an extra neutron making them about five ten percent heavier
than H20. They are commonly called ‘heavy water,’ and ‘semi-heavy water’ for that reason. This does not mean that water is not H20. Rather we discovered that there are different kinds of hydrogen and so discovered two subtypes of water. These water subtypes have all of the same properties as H20 and act chemically just like water. The exception being that chemical reactions take longer when D20 or HD0 are used.

A type counts as a subtype, roughly, if it has enough similarities with known exemplars of the supertype. XYZ would then count as a subtype of water if one thought that there were enough similarities between it and water around here. And there are. XYZ plays all the roles in people’s lives on Twin Earth as water does here. It looks, tastes, feels, the same as water does here. So water as a kind is made up of H20 and XYZ. Of course Kripke (and Putnam) reject this view because they have both stipulated that they are interested in stuff with the same molecular make-up as water around here so, obviously for them, XYZ is not a kind of water but as I have argued above, there is no reason why we can’t just as easily stipulate that we are interested in stuff that fits the description of water around here. Psychological kinds may work the same way. We have various ways of fixing the reference for mental states. We have typical behaviors, causal roles, common sense folk psychology, and our psychological theories to name a few. All of these various reference fixing methods gives us a description of the kind. In our investigation of these kinds so far we have discovered that they are identical to brain states, which I argue are patterns of synchronized neural activity (Brown forthcoming). If Martians with no brains had pains we would have then discovered a new type of pain. It is pain because ex hypothesi it feels painful for the Martians to be in whatever state they are in and their state ‘fits the description’ that we have of mental states. If the Martian
state is a subtype of pain then it should have enough similarities with our pain to justify classing it as a pain. It is a new type of pain because it is not a brain state.

Now as of right now we have no reason to think that there are different types of pain except for the intuition that there might be other species with mental states that don’t have brains. So IF we ever find a mental state that is not identical to some brain state we will have discovered a new type of mental state just as we found a new type of water. So Martians are no problem for R-Type identity but one may be worried about cases closer to home. After all we are not the only brained species here in the planet and we have evidence from neural plasticity, not to mention left handed people, that mental states may be ‘realized’ by different brain states. Again, I do not see the problem here. We are always discovering new types of things, why should mental states be any different? But even if you did think this was a problem it is one that would dissipate once we spell out what brain states are. In fact what gives power to the hypothesis that synchronized neural activity is crucial for and individuates the brain states that are mental states is exactly the fact that we see it in kittens, chimps, mollusks, and Humans. So it is plausible that mental states are not multiply realized across species here on Earth.

Also since the states in question are patterns of neural firing it doesn’t matter if the specific neurons that produce them are the same between individuals. The same pattern of neural activity may be produced differently in different brains. They will be identifiable as tokens of the same type because the same kinds of neurons will be involved in producing the same pattern which will fit the description for the type in question. So it is plausible that mental states are not multiply realized within species. Again, but even if I am wrong about this and we find out that human pain is a different
state than rat pain or that Richard pain is a different state than Mike pain, it would only show that mental states, as types, have subtypes. These subtypes, though distinguishable as types, will be very similar; nearly indistinguishable. Which, so far at least, has turned out to be the case.

Such is R-type identity theory. It recognizes the usefulness of epidentities while bearing in mind their danger. We can distinguish between mental and physical properties (or for that matter any types of properties we want) as a matter of convenience while resisting the urge to admit the properties so distinguished into our ontology. Thus people friendly to the view that there are two sets of properties here can keep their distinction with the qualification of epidentity. To avoid the fallacy of epidentity we must keep in mind that at the end of the day there is really only one thing we are talking about. By introducing frigid stipulation we are able to see that there is nothing threatening about Kripke or Chalmers-esq intuitions. Intuitions about what is possible depend on how an individual intends to use a term. We are also able to keep all the insights that Putnam type arguments give rise to with out having to give up type-type identity. There may be mental states that are not brain states but all that means is that we may discover a new type of mental state. For now the safe bet is that mental states are patterns of synchronized neural firing in a specific frequency. Thus there is no reason for the secret desires of closeted identity theorist to remain secret. Embracing R-Type Identity Theory can finally unite scientist and philosopher alike.
References

Brown, R. (forthcoming). "What is a Brain State?" *Philosophical Psychology*.

