The Present Self and the World-Individuating Record

A Record-Based Account of Personal Continuity, Memory, and World-Individuation

Abstract

This paper develops a record-based account of personal continuity within the broader framework of Record-Based Ontology (RBO) and Bit-Collapse Theory (BCT). The starting point is a deliberate denial of the substantial continuity of the self: the subject is not a metaphysical entity persisting through time, but a present conscious configuration supported by a finite physical and informational structure. At first sight, this seems to stand in tension with RBO's central claim that records are not merely epistemic traces but world-individuating structures. If the self is only present, how can memory and recordhood acquire ontological significance? The paper argues that this is not a contradiction but the central insight of the framework. The self does not persist as a substance; rather, physical records persist, stabilize, constrain, and individuate the world available to a present subject. In contrast with Parfit's reductionist account, according to which identity is not what matters and psychological continuity carries the practical weight, this paper argues that psychological continuity itself must be grounded in physical record-continuity, and that such records are not merely personal traces but world-individuating constraints. Personal continuity is therefore not an identity relation between successive selves, but a record-mediated coherence relation between present configurations. Subjectively, the self is an instantaneous or windowed configuration; objectively, the record-bearing system is a locus through which a world becomes definite in the precise individuative sense: not by producing reality ex nihilo, but by constraining an equivalence class of global states relative to accessible records. The result is a non-Cartesian, non-mystical, physically grounded account of subjectivity: the self is illusory as a substance, but real as a record-constrained locus of world-individuation.

Keywords: record-based ontology; personal identity; Derek Parfit; memory; consciousness; world-individuation; BCT; RBO; observer-relative definiteness; records; selfhood

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1. Introduction

A persistent philosophical temptation is to treat the self as a continuing entity: something that exists yesterday, today, and tomorrow, remaining numerically identical beneath psychological and bodily change. Against this, many lines of thought — from Humean bundle theories to contemporary reductionist accounts of personal identity — suggest that the self is not a substance but a construction: a narrative generated by memory, bodily continuity, social recognition, and practical expectation.

Record-Based Ontology (RBO) begins from a related but more radical intuition. The subject, as experienced, is not a thing moving through time. It is a present configuration: a finite structure of

conscious definiteness supported by physical records, active memory, bodily state, and currently accessible information. The "I" that seems to persist is not a metaphysical carrier of experience. It is a coherence effect produced by record continuity.

At first sight, this creates a problem. RBO and BCT place records at the center of ontology. They treat stable, accessible records not as passive traces but as structures that individuate worlds for agents. If the self is only a present configuration, why should records have such ontological weight? Is there a contradiction between denying the substantial continuity of the subject and making records central to the constitution of experienced reality?

This paper argues that there is no contradiction. The tension is real, but productive. It reveals the core move of RBO:

> the self does not persist; the record-structure persists, and a present self is the current conscious configuration generated within that record-structure.

Personal continuity is therefore neither a fiction in the trivial sense nor a metaphysical substance in the traditional sense. It is an ontological relation between records, present consciousness, and world-definiteness.

The central thesis can be stated as follows:

> The self is illusory as a persisting substance, but real as a record-constrained locus of world-individuation.

This allows RBO to avoid two symmetrical errors. Against crude materialism, it denies that personal identity is exhausted by the mere persistence of a body. Against crude idealism, it denies that consciousness creates the world ex nihilo. A present subject does not manufacture reality by thinking it. Rather, a present subject arises within a physical record-structure that constrains which global histories, states, and possibilities are definite for that subject. Records generate worlds only in this individuative sense: they do not produce reality from nothing; they determine what counts as a definite world relative to stable access.

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2. Parfit and the Shift from Psychological Continuity to Record-Continuity

Any contemporary account denying the deep metaphysical importance of personal identity must confront Derek Parfit. In *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit famously argues that personal identity is not what matters. What matters, in survival, responsibility, and rational concern, is not strict numerical identity but psychological continuity and connectedness: memory, intention, character, belief, desire, and other relations that link one person-stage to another.

RBO agrees with Parfit's anti-substantialist move. It also rejects the idea that a persisting ego-substance is required for survival, prudence, or responsibility. But RBO differs from Parfit at a deeper level.

Parfit's reductionism relocates practical importance from identity to psychological continuity. RBO asks what makes psychological continuity physically and ontologically possible in the first place. Its answer is: records.

Psychological continuity is not primitive. It is an effect of physical record-continuity. Memory, character, intention, habit, bodily orientation, social recognition, and autobiographical narrative are not free-floating psychological relations. They depend on stable, physically embodied and environmentally embedded records.

This difference can be formulated sharply:

> Parfit: identity is not what matters; psychological continuity is.
>
> RBO: psychological continuity itself is a record-effect, and records are world-individuating structures.

This is not merely a change of vocabulary. It changes the ontological role of continuity. In Parfit's framework, psychological continuity explains why future person-stages matter to present ones, without requiring strict identity. In RBO, psychological continuity is also a mechanism of world-individuation: it constrains which histories, objects, obligations, expectations, and possibilities are definite for a present subject.

A person does not merely remember a world. A person's accessible records determine which world is available as definite for that present configuration. This does not mean that the subject produces the world in a magical or idealist sense. It means that the subject's world is individuated by a record-structure: a physically constrained class of global states compatible with accessible records.

Thus, RBO can be understood as a physical and ontological deepening of Parfitian reductionism. It accepts that the self is not a separately existing entity. But it refuses to stop at psychological continuity. It asks what bears, stabilizes, and constrains that continuity — and then gives those record-bearing structures an ontological role beyond personal identity.

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3. The Apparent Tension: No Continuous Self, Yet World-Individuating Records

The apparent tension can be formulated sharply.

On the one hand, BCT/RBO denies the substantial continuity of the self. The subject is not an enduring metaphysical object. What exists, phenomenologically, is a present field or configuration of experience: a finite, structured, conscious state. The experienced "I" is reconstructed from memory, bodily integration, linguistic habit, and predictive continuity.

On the other hand, RBO assigns ontological significance to records. Records are not merely subjective impressions. They are physically stabilized correlations that constrain what can count as definite, accessible, and world-like for an agent. In BCT language, collapse is not an objective

physical jump in the universal state, but a record-defined class update: a transition in the equivalence class of global states relative to a stable-access window.

The problem is this: if the self is not continuous, why are memory and records not merely illusions inside a present moment? If consciousness only exists as a present configuration, why should past-generated records matter ontologically?

The answer is that RBO distinguishes three levels that ordinary language often collapses:

1. **The phenomenological subject**: the present conscious configuration.
2. **The psychological self-model**: the narrative construction of a persisting "I".
3. **The physical record-structure**: the real stabilizing network of memory, bodily traces, environmental correlations, and accessible information.

RBO denies the substantial continuity of level 1 as an enduring metaphysical ego. It also treats level 2 as constructed. But it does not deny level 3. On the contrary, level 3 is the physical condition under which level 1 can appear as level 2.

The self is not a substance that carries records. Rather, the record-structure is the condition under which a present configuration can experience itself as a self.

This is also why the language of "world-generation" must be handled carefully. Records do not produce the physical world as an act of subjective creation. They individuate the world available to a subject by constraining which global states remain compatible with stable access. The distinction between productive generation and individuative generation is not a minor clarification; it is the anti-idealist core of the position.

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4. The Present Self

The present self should not be understood as a mathematical instant of zero duration. Consciousness is not plausibly confined to a dimensionless point. It has retention, integration, temporal thickness, and structured access. In RBO/BCT terms, the present subject is better understood as a configuration within an access window: a finite interval or functional horizon within which information is retained, integrated, and available as part of a unified state.

This matters because the denial of personal continuity should not be mistaken for the claim that consciousness is a sequence of isolated flashes. The present is structured. It contains retention. It includes memory traces, bodily orientation, expectations, and perceptual integration. But this does not require a persisting ego-substance.

A present conscious state can include:

- memory of being a child;
- expectation of future action;
- bodily ownership;
- linguistic self-reference;

- emotional continuity;
- social identity;
- autobiographical narrative.

None of these requires that an identical metaphysical subject has travelled through time. They require only that the present configuration contains records organized in a way that represents such continuity.

The decisive point is this:

> The subject lives in the present, but the present contains physically inherited records.

This is the bridge between anti-substantialist selfhood and record-based ontology.

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5. Memory as Physical Record

Memory is often treated psychologically, as if it were merely a representation "inside the mind." RBO requires a stronger claim: memory is a physical record. It is not only an appearance of the past, but a present physical configuration whose structure has been shaped by prior interactions.

A memory does not prove the past in an absolute metaphysical sense. False memories, hallucinations, corrupted records, and misleading traces are possible. But even false memory is still a record in the basic sense: it is a present physical structure with representational content and causal embedding. The distinction between accurate and inaccurate memory is secondary to the more primitive fact of recordhood.

This produces a crucial three-level distinction:

1. **Recordhood**: the existence of a stable physical/informational trace.
2. **Representational accuracy**: whether the trace corresponds to the event it purports to represent.
3. **Inferential authority**: whether the trace is reliable enough to ground further belief, action, or world-construction.

Personal continuity depends primarily on recordhood, not on metaphysical identity. The present subject does not need to be numerically identical with a past subject in order to inherit that subject's memory-records. It only needs to be physically configured by records that encode, stabilize, and make available a past-oriented structure.

Thus, the illusion of continuous selfhood is not a mere error. It is a real effect produced by real records. The metaphysical interpretation is false; the physical basis is not.

A concise formulation is:

> The "same self" is not what persists through time; what persists is a structured record-continuity capable of generating the experience of sameness.

Here again, “generating” means individuating and configuring experience, not producing reality without physical ground. A memory-record generates a personal world by determining what is already settled for the present subject: who one has promised to meet, which language one speaks, which injuries one carries, which losses are real, which debts remain, which possibilities are already closed.

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6. From Memory to World-Individuation

The step from memory to world-individuation is where RBO becomes more than a theory of personal identity.

A record is not merely a trace inside a world already fully individuated independently of all access. Rather, for an agent, records determine which distinctions are available, which alternatives are excluded, and which global states remain coherent with the agent’s accessible reality. A record does not create the physical world from nothing. It individuates a world by constraining the class of global states compatible with what is stably accessible.

This is the core BCT/RBO move:

> a definite world for an agent is an equivalence class of global states under the agent’s accessible stable records.

Before a record is stabilized, multiple global configurations may remain equivalent relative to the agent’s access. After a record is stabilized, the equivalence class changes. This is what BCT describes as a collapse-like update, but without objective physical collapse. There is no need to add a new physical event to the global dynamics. The update concerns definiteness relative to records.

In this framework, memory is not merely autobiographical. It is world-structuring. A subject with different memory-records inhabits a different effective world, not because private fantasy overrides physics, but because accessible records define which world-structure is available to that subject.

This is why the phrase “records generate worlds” is powerful but dangerous. It is powerful because it captures the active ontological role of recordhood. It is dangerous because it can be misread as causal idealism.

The precise claim should be:

> Records generate worlds in the individuative sense, not in the ex nihilo productive sense.

That is, records do not manufacture physical reality out of consciousness. They determine which physically possible or globally coherent structure counts as the definite world for a given agent.

This distinction must remain in force throughout the entire account. Whenever RBO speaks of world-generation, the intended claim is not that consciousness creates being, but that records individuate definiteness.

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7. Subjectively Present, Objectively World-Individuating

We can now formulate the apparent paradox in its mature form:

> Subjectively, we are present configurations; objectively, we are record-bearing systems that individuate worlds.

This sentence must be read carefully.

Subjectively, the self is always now. Even memories of the past are present memories. Even expectations of the future are present anticipations. The subject never exits the current configuration in order to inspect time from outside. Consciousness is always given as present definiteness.

Objectively, however, the subject is not merely an isolated instant. The conscious configuration is embedded in a body, a brain, an environment, a history of interactions, and a network of stable records. These records constrain what can be remembered, believed, expected, perceived, and acted upon. In doing so, they define the effective world of the subject.

The result is neither eternalism about the ego nor presentist solipsism. It is record-based continuity:

> The self does not endure as a metaphysical object; it is regenerated as a present configuration within a persisting structure of records.

This explains why the denial of self-continuity does not trivialize ethics, responsibility, memory, or personal identity. These are not grounded in an immortal ego-substance. They are grounded in stable record-continuity, bodily and social embedding, and the persistence of structures that allow one present configuration to inherit, own, and answer for the traces of another.

The subject is not a world-maker in the metaphysical-creative sense. It is a world-individuating node: a locus in which physically inherited records make one world, rather than another, definite as the world of experience.

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8. Avoiding the Two Misreadings

RBO must avoid two misreadings.

8.1 The Materialist Misreading

The first misreading says: if memory is physical, then the self is simply the body or brain persisting through time.

This is too crude. Bodily continuity matters, but it does not by itself solve the problem of subjectivity. A body can change dramatically. Memory can be lost. Personality can fracture. Conscious access can disappear and reappear. The mere persistence of matter is not equivalent to the persistence of a self.

RBO instead says: what matters is not material sameness as such, but record-structured continuity under conditions of conscious access.

The body is crucial because it carries and maintains records. But the self is not identical to the body as a lump of matter. The self is the present conscious configuration generated within a record-bearing system.

8.2 The Idealist Misreading

The second misreading says: if records individuate worlds, then consciousness creates reality.

This is also wrong. RBO does not require consciousness to create the physical substrate. It requires physically stable records to define what is definite for a subject. The world is not a dream projected by the ego. Rather, the ego itself is a present construct inside a record-structured physical process.

The subject is not sovereign over the world. The subject is constrained by records. This is precisely what prevents RBO from collapsing into fantasy or solipsism.

A present subject cannot simply choose a different past, because its memory, body, environment, and social world already contain record constraints. The subject is not the author of reality; it is a node through which reality becomes definite under access conditions.

The refrain is therefore essential:

> record-based world-generation is individuative, not productive.

RBO does not say that consciousness creates the world. It says that stable records determine which world is definite for a conscious configuration.

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9. The Role of False Records

False records are central because they show that recordhood and truth are not identical.

A false memory, a misleading measurement, a forged document, or a hallucinated trace may still function as a record for a subject. It can guide action, structure belief, and shape the experienced world. However, its representational authority may collapse when it conflicts with broader record networks.

This matters for personal identity. A person can have false memories and still be a coherent subject. What matters for selfhood is not perfect historical accuracy, but the existence of a sufficiently stable record-structure capable of generating a unified present configuration.

But this does not mean "anything goes." False records are fragile when embedded in wider public record systems. They may be corrected, overridden, or isolated. RBO is therefore not relativism. It is a layered account:

- private definiteness depends on accessible records;
- public objectivity depends on intersubjectively stable records;
- truth depends on coherence, resilience, and integration across broader record networks.

The same structure applies to the self. The autobiographical self is not guaranteed by metaphysical identity. It is stabilized by record coherence across memory, body, environment, and social confirmation.

False records also clarify the individuative/productive distinction. A forged document may individuate a social world for those who trust it: a false inheritance, a wrongful accusation, a mistaken identity. But it does not thereby produce the underlying facts it represents. Its world-individuating power is conditional, fragile, and corrigible. The broader record network can expose it, isolate it, and collapse its authority.

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10. BCT Implications: Collapse as Self-World Update

In BCT, collapse is not a physical destruction of superposition. It is a record-defined class update. The agent's world becomes more definite when a stable record changes the equivalence class of global states compatible with that agent's accessible information.

The account of selfhood developed here gives this idea a deeper phenomenological interpretation.

A conscious subject is itself a record-conditioned configuration. Therefore, a collapse-like update is not merely an update "for" a pre-existing ego. It is also an update in the structure that constitutes the ego's present world.

This suggests a tight relation between definiteness, memory, and selfhood:

> A world becomes definite for an agent when the agent's record-structure changes in a way that constrains the global states compatible with its present conscious configuration.

This does not imply that consciousness causes quantum events. It implies that experienced definiteness is inseparable from the physical records that make a world accessible to a subject.

In this sense, BCT does not add consciousness to physics as an external force. It treats consciousness as the present configuration of a record-bearing system, and collapse as the update of world-definiteness relative to such systems.

Once again, the update is individuative rather than productive. Nothing here requires a mind to manufacture a physical outcome. The claim is that a stable record changes the class of global

states that remain definite for the agent. The world is not created by the subject; it becomes determinate for the subject through records.

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11. Responsibility Without a Substantial Self

The denial of a continuous ego can sound existentially destructive. If there is no persisting self, why should one care about the future? Why should responsibility survive? Why should memory matter?

RBO gives a non-mystical answer. Future subjects are not metaphysically identical with the present one, but they may inherit its records, bodily consequences, social commitments, and world-constraints. Responsibility does not require a soul-substance. It requires record-continuity and causal inheritance.

Consider a concrete case. Tonight, a person writes a cruel message to a friend. Tomorrow morning, the person wakes up and says: “That was not really me. The self of yesterday is gone; I am only this present configuration.” In one sense, RBO agrees: the present subject is not numerically identical with a metaphysical ego that travelled unchanged through the night. But the attempted escape fails. The message remains in the phone. The friend has read it. Shame, memory, social damage, and possible apology now belong to the record-structure inherited by the morning configuration.

The morning subject is not responsible because an invisible ego-substance persisted intact. It is responsible because it now occupies the record-world generated by yesterday’s act. The act has modified the accessible world: there is a sent message, a wounded friend, a changed relationship, a memory of intention, and a practical demand for repair.

This is responsibility as record-continuity. The subject is not punished for being a metaphysical same-soul. It is answerable because the present configuration inherits and is constrained by the records produced by the earlier configuration.

The same logic applies to promises, debts, care, artistic work, scientific authorship, and harm. To promise is to create a record that a future present will inherit. To injure someone is to alter the record-world in which future subjects, including oneself, must live. To write a book is to generate records that may outlast the psychological state that produced them.

Likewise, care for one’s future is not care for an absolutely identical metaphysical ego. It is care for a future conscious configuration that will inherit the records one is now producing.

The self is therefore neither an illusion to be dismissed nor a substance to be worshipped. It is a fragile, record-based achievement.

This has an unexpectedly humane consequence. We are not timeless egos trapped in bodies. Nor are we meaningless sparks with no relation to past or future. We are present configurations embedded in record systems that preserve, distort, transmit, and transform world-definiteness.

To live is to generate records that future presents will inherit.

12. Conclusion

The apparent contradiction at the heart of BCT/RBO is in fact its most fertile insight.

BCT begins by denying the substantial continuity of the self. The "I" is not a metaphysical object persisting through time. It is a present conscious configuration, structured by memory, bodily access, and physical information. But RBO then places records at the center of ontology, treating them as world-individuating structures.

This is not inconsistency. It is the theory's central transformation:

> what persists is not the self, but the record-structure that regenerates selfhood and individuates a world.

The paper's relation to Parfit clarifies the point. Parfit was right to reject the idea that strict identity is what matters. But RBO pushes the reduction one level deeper: psychological continuity is itself a physical record-effect, and records are not merely personal traces. They are constraints on world-definiteness.

The self is illusory as a substance, but real as a record-constrained locus of definiteness. Memory is not merely a story told by consciousness; it is a physical structure that binds present configurations to coherent histories. Records do not create worlds out of nothing, but they generate worlds in the precise individuative sense: they determine which global states are definite, accessible, and coherent for an agent.

The final formulation is therefore:

> Subjectively, we are present configurations. Objectively, we are record-bearing systems through which worlds become definite.

This is the hinge between personal identity, measurement, memory, and ontology. It is also one of the most distinctive promises of BCT/RBO: to replace the metaphysics of enduring selves with a physics and ontology of record-based world-definiteness.

Possible Integration in the Book

This paper can function as a bridge chapter between the philosophical account of selfhood and the more technical account of record-defined collapse. Its natural location is after the introduction of recordhood and before the full treatment of observer-relative definiteness. It can also be expanded into a broader chapter on memory, identity, and the ontology of subjectivity.

A possible book-title version of the core thesis:

> **The self does not continue; the world continues through records that regenerate the self.**

References

Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Brief Note on AI Assistance

This draft was developed with AI assistance under the conceptual direction, selection, revision, and authorship responsibility of Federico Batori. The philosophical framework, central theses, and project-level interpretation belong to the author; AI was used as a drafting and editorial tool.