The Waking Self Problem

Record-Continuity, Narrative Identity, and the Deflation of Primitive Persistence

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Part of a broader record-based philosophical program on subjectivity, identity, and quantum definiteness

Abstract

This paper argues that the ordinary sense of personal identity across interruption is stronger than the ontology needed to explain conscious continuity. We ordinarily speak as if the self that wakes is simply the same self that previously fell asleep, as if numerical identity persisted through sleep, anesthesia, forgetting, and other interruptions of experiential continuity. But the real explanatory work is better assigned elsewhere. What matters is not the persistence of a primitive metaphysical ego, but the structured inheritance of subject-constituting records.

The central claim is that a later conscious state counts as a continuation of an earlier one insofar as it preserves and integrates enough of the earlier state's record-structure in the right way. What ordinary language calls "the same self" is therefore not an ontological primitive but a narratively stabilized compression imposed on a chain of record-integrated experiential configurations. This view does not deny continuity. It explains it without appealing to an enduring substance, a privileged bodily token, or a bare first-person fact of persistence.

The paper develops this claim through what I call the waking self problem: on what basis does the subject who wakes identify itself with the subject who previously fell asleep? Standard appeals to bodily continuity, brain continuity, or immediate first-person certainty are shown to be either explanatorily indirect or metaphysically excessive. A record-based account does better. It preserves what is practically and phenomenologically important in personal identity while rejecting the stronger fiction of primitive persistence. The argument also connects with a broader record-based framework developed elsewhere: if subjecthood is individuated by subject-constituting informational structure, then diachronic continuity should also be understood in structural rather than substantial terms.

Keywords: personal identity; waking self; narrative identity; record-based subjectivity; sleep; anesthesia; duplication; continuity

1. Introduction

Few convictions feel more immediate than the belief that the self who wakes in the morning is simply the same self who fell asleep the night before. The conviction rarely appears as a philosophical thesis. It presents itself as obvious. We wake, recover our orientation, recognize

our room, remember unfinished tasks, and resume our projects. The continuity seems automatic.

Yet the metaphysical confidence of that ordinary judgment is stronger than the evidence clearly warrants. The later subject inherits memories, habits, expectations, and practical commitments from the earlier one. But inheritance is not obviously identity. Continuity is not obviously primitive persistence. The fact that a later experiential configuration takes itself to be the earlier one does not yet establish that one numerically identical self has persisted through interruption. It may instead show something weaker and more plausible: that the later configuration is a structurally linked continuation of the earlier one and therefore constructs, from within, the narrative of being the same self.

This paper begins from a simple question: what exactly licenses the identity claim made at waking? The issue is not confined to sleep. Similar pressure appears in dreamless interruption, anesthesia, amnesia, dissociation, duplication thought experiments, and fission cases. In each case, the temptation is to defend identity by brute force. One says that the same person persists because the same organism persists, because the same brain persists, or because first-person continuity must be presumed unless radical evidence to the contrary appears. But these strategies often either assume what they should explain or identify a carrier condition without giving a criterion of subjecthood.

The proposal defended here is record-based. A subject-state is not a metaphysical ego hidden behind experience. Nor is it merely an instantaneous snapshot. It is a finitely temporally integrated configuration of subject-constituting records: memories, perceptual integrations, retained constraints, expectations, self-models, dispositional structures, and other stabilized relations that make a coherent experiential trajectory possible. A later subject-state counts as a continuation of an earlier one when it inherits enough of that record-structure in the right way. What ordinary language calls “the same self” is therefore best understood as a practical and narrative shorthand for record-continuity strong enough to sustain experiential and practical coherence.

The claim is deflationary but not eliminativist. It does not deny that selves are real. It denies that the self must be real as a primitive persisting substance in order for continuity to be real. Continuity, memory, responsibility, practical orientation, and first-person organization can all be preserved while the metaphysical picture is thinned. The self is not abolished. It is de-primitiveized.

The argument also belongs to a broader record-based framework. In related work on the A=A problem for Everettian branching, I argued that there is no subject-multiplicity without subject-constituting informational difference. The present paper extends the same logic diachronically. If difference in subject-constituting structure is what earns distinct subjecthood, then continuity in subject-constituting structure is what earns subject-continuation through time. In this sense, the waking self problem is the everyday counterpart of the branching problem. The earlier issue asks why multiplication of realizers does not automatically multiply subjects. The present one asks why continuity of record-structure is enough for self-continuation without requiring primitive persistence.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 formulates the waking self problem more precisely. Section 3 argues that bodily and neural continuity are not sufficient as final grounds of personal identity. Section 4 introduces a record-based account of subject-continuation. Section 5 explains why the self is best understood as a narrative compression rather than an ontological primitive. Section 6 applies the view to sleep, anesthesia, amnesia, and duplication. Section 7 links the argument to the broader record-based framework. Section 8 considers the main objections. The conclusion is that the self who wakes is not secured by primitive persistence but constituted by record-linked continuation.

2. The Waking Self Problem

The duplication problem asks whether two later realizers of the same earlier person could both be that person. The waking self problem is more basic and more intimate. It asks: on what basis does the later subject, after interruption, identify itself with the earlier one at all?

Let C1 be a subject-constituting experiential configuration before interruption and C2 a later configuration after interruption. C2 inherits memories, expectations, dispositions, and practical orientation linked to C1. Does that relation entail that C1 and C2 are one and the same subject in the strong metaphysical sense? Or does it establish something more modest but more defensible: that C2 is an admissible continuation of C1 in virtue of inherited record-structure?

The difference matters because first-person conviction cannot settle the matter by itself. A later subject may be fully convinced of continuity and still be mistaken about the metaphysical status of that continuity. Duplication cases make this vivid. If a perfect duplicate wakes elsewhere with the same memories, that duplicate too will judge itself to be the earlier self. Since both cannot possess privileged first-person authority merely in virtue of identical inherited records, the felt certainty of “I am the same one” cannot be a sufficient criterion. The ordinary waking case differs mainly in being less dramatic and less symmetric.

What ordinary waking adds is contextual asymmetry. There is usually one body, one social track, one uninterrupted causal infrastructure, one familiar environment, one memory-bearing organism. This makes the story of sameness overwhelmingly natural. But naturalness is not ontology. The question is whether there is, in addition to this continuity structure, a primitive self that literally persists through interruption. I will argue that such a further posit is not needed.

The waking self problem therefore exposes a gap between practical self-attribution and metaphysical explanation. The self-ascription made at waking may be perfectly intelligible and even overwhelmingly reasonable. But the right explanation of its intelligibility may lie not in primitive personal identity, but in the later configuration’s organized inheritance of earlier records.

3. Why Bodily and Neural Continuity Are Not Enough

A natural response is that the same organism sleeps and later wakes, so the same person persists. This view has practical force. Bodies matter for social, legal, and everyday identity. But bodily continuity is too coarse to do the full philosophical work often assigned to it.

First, bodily continuity can outstrip subject-continuity. The body remains through dreamless sleep, deep anesthesia, coma, severe dementia, and cases of radical psychological fragmentation. The mere persistence of the organism does not yet explain why the later experiential configuration should count as the same subject rather than merely the later experiential product of the same organism. The body provides a carrier condition, not yet a criterion of subjecthood.

Second, bodily continuity is too blunt in hypothetical cases. If a duplicate were created elsewhere while the original body persisted, bodily continuity would simply privilege one line by fiat. But that would not explain why bodily tokenhood should outrank the informational and experiential structure that seems to do the real constitutive work. It would merely assume that subjecthood is primitively attached to a substrate-token.

A more sophisticated move appeals to neural continuity. The same brain remains in place, preserving causal continuity through interruption. This is stronger than the bodily criterion, but it too is insufficient as a final answer. Neural continuity matters because it usually preserves the record-structure from which waking continuity arises. Its explanatory role is therefore mediated. The brain matters, in the present context, insofar as it physically stores, stabilizes, and reactivates subject-constituting records. Once that is granted, the deeper ontological work has shifted from tissue as such to the organized record-structure that the tissue supports.

This is the decisive point. The body and brain are not being dismissed. They are typically indispensable physical conditions. But their philosophical relevance is indirect. They explain how continuity is physically sustained. They do not supply an additional metaphysical self over and above the continuity they make possible.

This conclusion is broadly compatible with the strongest traditions in the modern debate. Locke made memory central to personal identity, though in a form too narrow for present purposes. Butler and Reid criticized straightforward memory theories for circularity and for their inability to distinguish evidence of identity from identity itself. Contemporary psychological continuity views, especially Parfit's, weakened the demand for strict identity and shifted attention toward relations of connectedness and continuity. Animalist views, by contrast, insist that we are fundamentally organisms. The present position accepts the need for a real physical bearer but denies that bearer-status alone settles subjecthood. It is therefore closer to psychological continuity views, but broader and more structural: what matters is not memory alone, nor narrative alone, but subject-constituting record-structure.

This view is closer to Parfit than to substance theories of the self, but it is not simply Parfitian reductionism in different language. Parfit weakens the role of strict identity and emphasizes psychological continuity and connectedness. The present proposal agrees with the deflation of primitive identity, but adds a more explicit constitutive claim: what grounds subject-continuation is not psychological continuity in a broad and relatively neutral sense, but the inheritance and integration of subject-constituting record structure. In that sense, the view is not merely revisionary about what matters; it is structurally specific about what a subject is.

4. Record-Continuity

The alternative proposed here is a record-based criterion of subject-continuation. A subject-state is a finitely temporally integrated configuration of subject-constituting records. These include not only autobiographical memories but perceptual integrations, bodily maps, affective orientations, linguistic habits, anticipatory structures, inferential dispositions, retained constraints, and self-modeling relations. What matters is not isolated information but integrated organization.

This yields a simple principle.

Record-Continuation Principle. A later experiential configuration C2 counts as an admissible continuation of an earlier configuration C1 insofar as C2 inherits, preserves, and integrates enough of C1's subject-constituting record structure to sustain a coherent experiential trajectory.

Several features of this principle matter.

First, it does not require total preservation. Real continuity is selective, reconstructive, and often lossy. Ordinary waking does not preserve every detail. Forgetting is constant. Yet continuity may remain robust because enough structure is inherited in the right way.

Second, the principle is broader than explicit memory. A subject may lose autobiographical recall while preserving language, practical orientation, temperament, perceptual habits, embodied expectations, or other stabilizing records. Continuity therefore cannot be reduced to the ability to remember particular past experiences.

Third, the principle avoids the false choice between strict identity and total discontinuity. The relation between C1 and C2 is neither that of a primitive identical ego nor that of two wholly disconnected experiential atoms. It is a structured relation of record-inheritance.

The ordinary language of "same self" may still be retained. But its ontological content changes. It now means something like this: the later configuration stands in a sufficiently rich record-continuity relation to the earlier one to sustain practical, experiential, and narrative coherence. That is a strong relation, but it is not the persistence of a primitive metaphysical subject.

5. Narrative Identity and the Illusion of Personal Persistence

If record-continuity does the real explanatory work, what becomes of the self? The answer is not that the self disappears. It is that the self changes ontological status.

The self is best understood as a narrative compression imposed by later configurations upon the continuity conditions that constitute them. A later configuration inherits records encoding a structured past. It therefore tells a simple story: I was there before; I continued through interruption; I remain the same one. This story is not arbitrary. It tracks a real continuity relation. But it compresses that relation into a stronger image than the ontology requires.

Narratives are compressions because they smooth complexity into manageable form. The actual situation is a chain of record-integrated configurations, each inheriting and modifying earlier

structure. The narrative self packages this chain as the persistence of one enduring subject. In ordinary life this is efficient and mostly harmless. It supports planning, recognition, moral responsibility, social coordination, and practical reasoning. But philosophical convenience should not be mistaken for metaphysical primitive fact.

This is why the self can feel both undeniable and fragile. It is undeniable because continuity is real. It is fragile because the thing said to persist is not a simple ego but a structure of inherited records. When those records are damaged, masked, duplicated, selectively erased, or partitioned, the narrative of one enduring self comes under pressure. Extreme cases do not create the instability. They reveal the instability already present in the ordinary case.

The phrase “illusion of the self” therefore needs care. Consciousness is not the illusion. Continuity is not the illusion. What is illusory is the stronger picture in which continuity must be underwritten by a primitive, numerically identical self that remains literally the same through every interruption. The narrative self is a real cognitive construction built upon real continuity. But it is still a construction.

6. Applications

6.1 Sleep and ordinary waking

Sleep is the canonical everyday case. A subject falls asleep, undergoes a period in which ongoing experience may be sparse, dream-filled, or absent from later recall, and later wakes with restored orientation. Ordinary language says the same self persisted through the night. The record-based account offers a more disciplined explanation. The waking subject is a later configuration that inherits enough subject-constituting structure from the pre-sleep configuration to resume a coherent trajectory. Nothing further is required.

This explains both the strength and the fragility of waking identity. It feels immediate because the inherited structure is usually rich, coherent, and socially reinforced. But the feeling itself is generated from within the later configuration. It is not independent evidence of primitive persistence.

6.2 Anesthesia

Anesthesia sharpens the point. Subjects often report no internal bridge across the interruption, only discontinuity followed by reappearance. Yet they ordinarily judge themselves to be the same person who lay down before the procedure. The record-based account has no difficulty here. The later configuration inherits the relevant subject-constituting structure and therefore continues the earlier trajectory. What is absent is not continuity in the structural sense, but an internally represented bridge through the interruption.

6.3 Amnesia and pathological disruption

Disorders of memory and self-modeling show that personal identity is graded, structured, and vulnerable. Severe amnesia may preserve language, practical habits, bodily orientation, and temperament while destroying large portions of autobiographical continuity. Capgras-like disturbances may preserve facial recognition while disrupting affective familiarity. Dissociative

fragmentation may generate partially insulated self-models within one organism. The lesson is not that identity simply vanishes. It is that continuity is record-structured and therefore decomposable. The self is not all-or-nothing because the records that constitute it are not all-or-nothing.

6.4 Duplication and teleportation

Duplication thought experiments reveal why waking self-certainty cannot be the final criterion. If two later configurations inherit the same earlier records, both will judge themselves to be the earlier self. This does not show that continuity is unreal. It shows that continuity does not imply uniqueness of primitive identity. The record-based account can therefore say: both are admissible continuations, but neither is entitled to monopolize a primitive self-fact. What branches is not a metaphysical ego but a continuity structure.

Seen this way, duplication does not introduce a wholly alien problem. It radicalizes a point that ordinary waking already contains. The waking self problem is the low-drama version of the same structural issue.

7. Relation to A=A and Record-Based Subjectivity

The present argument should be read as part of a broader record-based philosophical program rather than as an isolated thesis about waking. In the A=A problem for branching observers, I argued that physical realizer multiplicity does not automatically entail subject multiplicity. There is no subject-multiplicity without subject-constituting informational difference. The current paper extends the same logic diachronically.

If informational difference is what earns distinct subjecthood across branching, then informational continuity is what grounds subject-continuation across time. The two claims are mirror images.

1. **Synchronic constraint:** no multiplication of subjects without subject-constituting informational difference.
2. **Diachronic constraint:** no need for primitive persistence where record-continuity already grounds subject-continuation.

Together they yield a more general picture. Subjecthood is neither attached to bare physical tokenhood nor preserved by metaphysical inertia. It is constituted and continued by structured records. This does not commit one to a thin or purely digital picture of mind. It states only that whatever physically realizes subjectivity must realize it as an integrated record-configuration, and that the identity conditions of subjectivity track that structure.

This connection matters because otherwise the ontology becomes unstable. One cannot reject automatic subject multiplication in branching cases on record-based grounds and then silently reintroduce primitive identity in the ordinary waking case. The same structural logic should govern both.

8. Objections

8.1 “This collapses identity into memory”

No. The present view does not reduce identity to explicit autobiographical memory. Records are broader than memory in the ordinary sense. They include dispositional, perceptual, bodily, affective, and inferential structures. The claim is not that remembering a past event is enough for continuity, but that continuity depends on inherited record-organization rather than on a primitive self.

8.2 “This makes the self unreal”

No. It makes the self non-primitive. Selves are real as organized continuities of record-integrated experience. What is denied is only a stronger metaphysics in which the self persists as an indivisible substance over and above those continuities.

8.3 “This cannot distinguish survival from replacement”

The objection assumes that only primitive identity can ground survival. But survival may itself be understood structurally. What matters is whether later configurations preserve and extend the relevant record-structure in the right way. Replacement by an unrelated configuration is not survival. Record-linked continuation is.

8.4 “Ordinary life does not need this deflation”

Ordinary life may not need it, but philosophy does. The practical usefulness of ordinary self-language is not evidence for primitive persistence. The aim is not to abolish that language but to explain what makes it work and why difficult cases expose its limits.

9. Conclusion

The self who wakes should not be understood as an automatically persisting metaphysical subject whose identity survives interruption by brute fact. That picture is stronger than the evidence warrants and less illuminating than the alternative. What actually underwrites waking continuity is record-inheritance: the preservation and integration of subject-constituting structure across interruption.

This account preserves what matters in ordinary selfhood while rejecting unnecessary metaphysical inflation. Continuity is real. Narrative identity is real. Practical personhood is real. But the deeper ontology is structural rather than substantial. The self is a record-linked continuity of experiential configurations, not a primitive enduring ego.

The waking self problem therefore reveals something general. The same framework that blocks automatic subject multiplication in branching cases also blocks automatic appeal to primitive persistence in diachronic ones. In both directions, what matters is informational structure: difference where subjects divide, continuity where subjects continue. Once that is seen, the self becomes neither mystical nor illusory in the crude sense. It becomes intelligible.

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Author note

This paper is part of a broader record-based philosophical program concerning subjectivity, personal identity, and quantum definiteness. It can be read independently, but it also connects with companion work on subject-individuation and record-based subjectivity.

Note on AI use

AI tools were used for drafting assistance, conceptual testing, and editing. The author takes responsibility for the final claims, structure, wording, and references.