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Excerpt

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Introduction

From Plato until John Locke personal identity was explained in the West primarily by appeal to the notion of a spiritual substance or soul. From Locke until the late 1960s it was explained both in this Platonic way and by appeal to physical and/or psychological relations between a person at one time and one at another (and theorists assumed that how earlier and later persons are related to each other, through intervening persons, by itself determines whether the two are the same person). Since the 1960s there have been three major developments: First, so-called intrinsic relational views have been largely superseded by extrinsic relational (or closest-continuer, or externalist) views, according to which what determines whether a person at one time and one at another are identical is not just how the two are related to each other but also how they are related to every other person. Second, the traditional metaphysical debate over personal identity has spawned a closely related but relatively novel debate over egoistic survival values. This debate has been over the question of whether – from what in actual, as opposed to hypothetical, circumstances would pass for a self-interested point of view – identity or other relations that do not suffice for identity do and/or should matter primarily in survival. And, third, some theorists have replaced the traditional three-dimensional view of persons with a four-dimensional view, according to which the relata of the identity relation are not (whole) persons at short intervals of time but, rather, appropriately unified aggregates of person-stages that collectively span a lifetime.

Two of these developments seem to be here to stay. Extrinsic relational views, while somewhat controversial, have largely replaced the older intrinsic relational views. And the four-dimensional view, while it hasn't replaced the three-dimensional view, is widely accepted, even by those who prefer a three-dimensional view, as an alternative way to understand persons. The fate of the remaining third-phase development, which hinges on that of the revolutionary thesis that identity is *not* what matters pri-

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marily in survival, still hangs in the balance. Although this thesis was endorsed initially by Shoemaker (1970) and Parfit (1971) (and later by Nozick, 1981), subsequently, several other influential philosophers, including Lewis (1976,1983), Sosa (1990), and Unger (1991), have argued forcefully for the traditional idea that identity *is* (or is a precondition of) what matters primarily in survival (henceforth, understand the expression *what matters in survival* to include the qualification, *or is a precondition of what matters*). Still other philosophers (e.g., Wilkes, 1988; Donagan, 1990; and Baillie, 1993) have questioned the philosophical significance of hypothetical examples of (possibly) impossible situations, on which the whole debate over what matters primarily in survival depends.

More than anything else, it has been fission examples that are responsible for the recent revolution in personal identity theory. In the sort of fission examples that have been most discussed, a person somehow divides – in David Wiggins’s initial illustrations, amoeba-like – into two or more (seemingly) numerically different persons, each of whom initially is qualitatively identical to the other(s) and also to the prefission person from whom they both (all) emerged (Wiggins,1967). (That is how on a three-dimensional view of persons one would describe what happens; in Chapters 4 and 5 I explain how it would be described on a four-dimensional view and also why for the issues that concern me it does not matter which view I adopt.) The consideration of fission examples motivated philosophers to face the possibility that people might be continued by others whose existences they would value as much as their own and in pretty much the same ways as they would value their own. It also motivated philosophers, appropriately enough, to separate two questions that they had been treating as one: the traditional question of determining what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for personal identity over time and the new question of determining what matters primarily in survival.

The fission examples that in recent times have preoccupied philosophers are for the most part science-fiction scenarios far removed from the practical realities of day-to-day life and death. But these examples have been inspired by real life situations. In the late 1930s, neurosurgeons in the United States began performing a procedure in which they severed the corpus callosums of severe epileptics in the hope of confining their seizures to one hemisphere of their brains and thus reducing their severity. Often this procedure was doubly successful in that it reduced not only the severity of the seizures but also their frequency. However, it also had a bizarre side-effect, not discovered until many years later. It seemingly created two independent centers of consciousness within the same human skull. These

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apparent centers of consciousness lacked introspective access to each other; they could be made to acquire and express information independently of each other; and, most dramatically, they sometimes differed volitionally, expressing their differences using alternate sides of the same human bodies they jointly shared. In one case, a man who had had this operation reportedly hugged his wife with one arm while he pushed her away with the other; in another a man tried with his right hand (controlled by his left, verbal hemisphere) to hold a newspaper where he could read it, thereby blocking his view of the TV, while he tried with his left hand (controlled by his right hemisphere) to knock the paper out of the way.

The fission examples of philosophers are tidier and more complete than these real life cases. As a result they have brought the issue of egoistic survival values into sharper theoretical focus. However, their use in connection with the debate over personal identity and related issues has become controversial. In particular some have argued that because these fission examples are of (possibly) impossible situations, the consideration of them cannot shed any light on what matters in survival. I shall return to these worries in Chapter 1. First, though, it is worth recognizing that fission examples are not merely a by-product of the recent consideration of science-fiction scenarios. Rather, consideration of them had arisen previously in the eighteenth century (for a fuller account than the one about to be given, see Martin and Barresi, 1995; Martin, Barresi, and Giovannelli, forthcoming).

With the exception of Spinoza, Western theorists of personal identity prior to John Locke took the identity of people to depend essentially on the continuity of their souls. Their view was that souls were immaterial, indivisible, and hence naturally immortal. They argued about how matter could combine with souls to form living persons. But since almost all of the theorists who were party to this debate were Christians, they accepted, and were concerned to provide an account that would explain, how the same people who had lived on Earth could live again in the afterlife. They agreed that the persistence of souls would underwrite everyone's persistence into the afterlife, but they hotly debated whether, once there, the soul would rejoin with matter that formed the person's body on Earth or, instead, would join with a body made of different matter.

Locke's innovation was the genuinely radical and progressive thesis that the identities of resurrected people do not depend on their having either the same souls or the same bodies, or even the same matter, but, rather, on their having the same consciousnesses. In supporting this explosive new idea Locke was preoccupied with the implications of fissionlike examples,

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such as his “day-man/night-man” example (1694/1975, II, ch. 27, sec. 23). Most of his fissionlike examples do not involve one consciousness dividing into two, each of which is then continuous with the original, contemporaneous with the other, and yet independent of the other. Hence, most are not genuine fission examples. However, Locke eventually goes on to consider the possibility that in a case in which one’s little finger is cut off, consciousness might not only stay with the main part of the body or only go with the little finger, but instead might split and go with both: “Though if the same Body should still live, and immediately from the separation of the little Finger have its own peculiar consciousness, whereof the little Finger knew nothing, it would not at all be concerned for it, as a part of it *self*, or could own any of its Actions, or have any of them imputed to him” (1694/1975, II, 27, 18). In giving this example Locke became the first personal identity theorist to consider a genuine fission example explicitly. And although he did not then go on to explore its implications for his theory of personal identity, once he published his new theory the fission example cat was out of the bag.

Locke also introduced several distinctions that are crucial to considering fission examples and that have figured importantly in the post-1960s discussion. For instance, when he said, “For as to this point of being the same *self*, it matters not whether this present *self* be made up of the same or other Substances; I being as much concern’d and as justly accountable for any Action was done a thousand Years since, appropriated to me now by this self-consciousness, as I am, for what I did the last moment” (1694/1975, II, 27, 16), he linked the question of whether a person persists to that of whether a present self-consciousness has a special kind (or degree) of *concern* for someone in the past and is *accountable* for and has *appropriated* the actions of someone in the past. It is a short step from the separation of these three elements that ordinarily attend personal persistence to considering the possibility that one or more of these elements might obtain even when a person does not persist.

Whatever his own intentions may have been, Locke also suggested, to both critics and admirers of his new theory, that people are fictional entities. In the first edition of the *Essay* he did this by the uses to which he put his distinction between the “natural” and the “moral” man. In subsequent editions he did it by distinguishing between man as an *animal*, whose nature presumably it is the job of science to discover, and man as a *rational being*, that is, a *person*, which Locke seems to have regarded as a normatively defined hybrid. Although the details are complicated, Locke at the least seems to have been working toward the view, and may even have arrived at

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it, that persons come into being as a natural by-product of processes of identification and the application of self-concepts that are ingredients in reflexive consciousness (see, e.g., Law, 1823, III, pp. 177–201; Behan, 1979; Ayers, 1991, II, pp. 273–7).

From 1706 to 1709 Locke's fissionlike examples and his suggestions leaning toward the view that persons are fictions had a remarkable development in the six-part published debate between Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins. In this exchange Clarke defended a traditional, spiritual substance view of self and Collins a view very like Locke's (Clarke, 1738/1928, III, pp. 720–913). Ironically, from our current perspective, it was Clarke, rather than Collins, who introduced the idea of fission. He introduced it in order to make the point that a sequence of like consciousnesses is not the same as a series of acts by a single consciousness:

Such a Consciousness in a Man, whose Substance is wholly changed, can no more make it Just and Equitable for such a Man to be punished for an Action done by another Substance; than the Addition of the like Consciousness (by the Power of God) to two or more new created Men; or to any Number of Men now living, by giving a like Modification to the Motion of the Spirits in the Brain of each of them respectively, could make them All to be one and the same individual Person, at the same time that they remain several and distinct Persons; or make it just and reasonable for all and every one of them to be punished for one and the same individual Action, done by one only, or perhaps by none of them at all. (pp. 844–5)

In this imaginary fission scenario Clarke thought Collins's view would lead him to having to say of two or more individuals that they are and also are not the same persons. Clarke subsequently reiterated several variations on this example. Although the debate between Clarke and Collins is not often discussed explicitly by subsequent eighteenth-century philosophers, there are many indications that it was widely read. These, then, are evidence that philosophers generally were at least aware of fission examples.

We know that Joseph Butler was familiar with the debate between Clarke and Collins, even though he never discusses it, because he twice footnotes it (1736/1852, pp. 32, 321). However, Butler does discuss some of the key themes that emerged in the debate. His best known thought on personal identity is, of course, his charge that the memory analysis of it is circular. However, immediately after making this famous objection to the memory view, he highlights two other issues that had surfaced both in Locke and in the Clarke–Collins debate. The issues are, first, that there are certain important links among identity, responsibility, and self-concern

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and, second, that on a view such as Locke's it is questionable whether persons (or selves) are real or merely fictional.

Butler introduced these issues by asking "whether the same rational being is the same substance," which, he said, "needs no answer because Being and Substance, in this place, stand for the same idea" (1736/1852, p. 320). He continued, "The consciousness of our own existence, in youth and in old age, or in any two joint successive moments, is not the *same individual action*, i.e., not the same consciousness, but different successive consciousnesses" (pp. 320–1). And, yet, "the person, of whose existence the consciousness is felt now, and was felt an hour or a year ago, is discerned to be, not two persons, but one and the same person; and therefore is one and the same" (p. 321). From this, he said, "It must follow" on a view such as Locke's, that,

it is a fallacy upon ourselves to charge our present selves with any thing we did, or to imagine our present selves interested in any thing which befell us yesterday; or that our present self will be interested in what will befall us tomorrow; since our present self is not, in reality, the same with the self of yesterday, but another like self or person coming in its room, and mistaken for it; to which another self will succeed tomorrow. This, I say, must follow: for if the self or person of today, and that of tomorrow, are not the same, but only like persons the person of today is really no more interested in what will befall the person of tomorrow than in what will befall any other person. (p. 322)

Butler conceded that "those who maintain" the view he is criticizing "allow that a person is the same as far back as his remembrance reaches" and "use the *words, identity and same person*" (p. 322). And, he pointed out, "Language [will not] permit these words to be laid aside, since if they were, there must be I know not what ridiculous periphrasis substituted in the room of them" (p. 322). But, he claimed, Lockeans "cannot, consistently with themselves, mean, that the person is really the same . . . but only that he is so in a *fictional* sense: in such a sense only as they assert, for this they do assert, that *any number of persons whatever may be the same person*" (p. 322; emphasis added). Butler concluded that a person or self "is not an idea, or abstract notion, or quality, but a being only, which is capable of life and action, of happiness and misery," and, hence, not a fiction (p. 323).

In sum, so far as Butler was concerned, if Locke's view were true, our present selves would have no reason to be especially concerned about our future selves or to hold themselves accountable for what our past selves had done. Yet, in Butler's view, regardless of our philosophical views we must

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retain the language of self and person. So, if Locke's view were true, even though we would continue to speak of selves and persons in a normal way, we would have to consider there to be selves and persons only in a fictitious sense. Butler thought that this refuted Locke's view, but not because he thought he could prove Locke's view is false (he admitted he could not; 1736/1852, p. 325). Rather, he thought it refuted Locke's view because "the bare unfolding this notion [that selves are merely fictitious entities] and laying it thus naked and open, seems the best confutation of it" (p. 322).

Neither David Hume nor Adam Smith ever discussed the question of personal identity in anything like the way in which Locke, Clarke, Collins, or Butler discussed it; for instance, neither had anything to say that is directly relevant to the question of which relations are crucial to personal persistence. Perhaps as a consequence neither Hume nor Smith discussed fission examples. Thomas Reid, though, may have commented on fission examples, albeit briefly, when he said of Locke's view of personal identity that it "hath some strange consequences, which the author was aware of, Such as, that, if the same consciousness can be transferred from one intelligent being to another, which he thinks we cannot shew to be impossible, then two or twenty intelligent beings may be the same person" (Reid, 1785, VI, p. 3). However, there is no way to tell exactly what Reid had in mind. Others, such as Abraham Tucker, also discussed fission examples (1763/1984, pp. 204–5; 1768–77/1977, pp. 73, 80–1). But so far as the question of what matters in survival is concerned, the real breakthroughs came in the writings of Joseph Priestley and William Hazlitt, to whom I shall return in Chapter 6. For now, the important point is that concern with the question of what matters in survival is not a by-product of recently concocted science-fiction-generated fission examples, but, rather, a recurring theme in the history of modern philosophy. Moreover it is a theme that has struck to the roots of peoples' existential involvement with their views of their own natures and prospects.

A puzzle remains. Since fission examples were discussed throughout the eighteenth (and even into the nineteenth) century, why didn't the same sort of theoretical revolution that has occurred in our own times occur then, at least in the work of those who were sympathetic to a relational account of identity? In other words, why, in the eighteenth century, didn't the ideas that precipitated the revolution in personal identity theory in our own times ever really catch on?

Somewhat surprisingly, from our current perspective, part of the answer has to be that there were not many influential eighteenth-century

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theorists who were sympathetic to relational accounts of personal identity. Locke and Hume were sympathetic, but Hume chose not to discuss the kinds of examples that might have led him to anticipate post-1960s developments. Collins was sympathetic, but he was not an important philosopher and may even have set the cause back by allowing himself to be upstaged by Clarke. Berkeley, Butler, Reid, and Tucker were substance theorists. As we shall see, Priestley and Hazlitt were sympathetic, but Priestley did not discuss personal identity and survival all that much, and Hazlitt had the misfortune of writing just before Kant burst onto the scene and changed the topic.

The revolution in personal identity theory that has occurred in our own times required that thinkers go beyond the relational view of personal identity. But before thinkers could go beyond that view they first had to accept it. And surprising as it may sound to us today, the relational view wasn't generally accepted in the eighteenth century. In fact, it wasn't even *generally* accepted in the nineteenth (see, e.g., how Sidgwick uses the substance view to deflect worries about what matters in survival; 1907/1874, p. 418). For its general acceptance the relational view had to await the twentieth century, by which time Priestley and Hazlitt were rarely read by personal identity theorists, and fission examples, despite the brief mention of them in Locke and Reid, had been largely forgotten.

Another part of the answer is that, in the eighteenth century, fission examples tended to be introduced into the debate over personal identity not as a way of developing a relational view, but rather as an *objection* to it. Those, like Collins, who were sympathetic to Locke, were intent on defending a Lockean view against a threatened retreat back into what they regarded as obscurantist metaphysics. They saw fission examples as a possible motivation for such a retreat. So, the context was not conducive to anyone's seeing that fission examples, rather than an objection to a relational approach, were a way of pushing that approach to even more radical conclusions.

Finally, in spite of the widespread misconception that, during the Enlightenment, religious dogma beat a hasty retreat before the mighty advance of secular rationality, Christianity, in particular, even among the best thinkers of the age, held its ground (indeed, it is still somewhat holding its ground). Before thinkers generally could seriously question the importance of personal identity, the influence of Christianity had to be blunted. From the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries most important Western thinkers who took self and personal identity theory seriously were Christians. As such, they accepted the idea that there will be a resurrection

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attended by divine rewards and punishments. Few had Priestley's ability, or even his motivation, to envision how those rewards and punishments might on a relational view, let alone in the absence of personal persistence, still serve the cause of divine justice and human morality. And, even in our own times, well-regarded philosophers have expressed doubts about whether in the absence of personal persistence a version of resurrection acceptable to Christians can be worked out (Ayers, 1991, II, p. 272).

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Questions

In our own times the use of hypothetical examples in connection with the debate over personal identity and related issues has become controversial. In particular, some have argued that because these examples are of (possibly) impossible situations, the consideration of them cannot shed light on what matters in survival. Since in the present study I intend to make use of hypothetical examples of (possibly) impossible situations, I want now to defend the uses to which I shall put them. To do that, I first specify a fission example that is a modified version of one originally presented by Shoemaker (1984, p. 119). Then I use this example to explain why fission examples, in particular, and hypothetical examples of (possibly) impossible situations, in general, are not only a legitimate but perhaps an indispensable tool in revealing what matters to people in survival.

Imagine, then, that you have a health problem that will result soon in your sudden and painless death unless you receive one or the other of two available treatments. The first is to have your brain removed and placed into the empty cranium of a body that, except for being brainless, is qualitatively identical to your own. The second is to have your brain removed, divided into functionally identical halves (each capable of sustaining your full psychology), and then to have each of these halves put into the empty cranium of a body of its own, again one that is brainless but otherwise qualitatively identical to your own.

In the first treatment there is a 10 percent chance that the transplantation will take. If it takes, the survivor who wakes up in the recovery room will be physically and psychologically like you just prior to the operation except that he will know he has had the operation and will be healthy. In the second there is a 95 percent chance that both transplantations will take. If both take, each of the survivors who wakes up in the recovery room will be physically and psychologically like you just prior to the operation except that each of them will know he has had the operation and each will be healthy. If the transplantation in the first treatment does not take, the