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0521592666 - *Self-Concern: An Experiential Approach to What Matters in Survival*

Raymond Martin

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This highly original book is a major contribution to the philosophical literature on the nature of the self and on the question of what matters in survival. Its objective is to provide a rationale and a model for a new kind of approach to our deepest egoistic values. This approach aims to be descriptive, including of our subjective experience, rather than metaphysical or normative in its intended results. However, its ultimate objective is not only to reveal what our values are but to facilitate their transformation.

On the basis of this new approach Raymond Martin shows that the distinction between self and other is not nearly as fundamental a feature of our so-called egoistic values as has traditionally been thought. He also explains the implications of his approach for recent debates over personal identity and what matters in survival.

*Self-Concern* is the first book of analytic philosophy directly on the phenomenology of identity and survival. It aims to build bridges between analytic and phenomenological traditions and, thus, to open up a new field of investigation.

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AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO  
WHAT MATTERS IN SURVIVAL

*Raymond Martin*  
University of Maryland, College Park



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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

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*To Louis and Ann Martin  
my parents*

## *Contents*

Preface	<i>page</i> ix
Introduction	1
1 Questions	10
2 Anticipation	31
3 Rejuvenation	53
4 Transformation	73
5 Identification	93
6 Experience	130
References	163
Index	167

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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

## Preface

Occasionally, but not often, philosophers discover something genuinely new – a new problem or a subtle change in an old problem that brings a new set of issues into focus. When this happens circumstances are ripe for transformations not just of what we believe but also of what we think is worth considering and how we think we ought to proceed.

Beginning in the late 1960s something genuinely new happened in the centuries-old philosophical debate over personal identity; more precisely, something new would have happened, had it not happened once before, in the eighteenth century (this earlier discussion then was forgotten). What was new, on both occasions, is that tacit and extremely natural assumptions about the importance of identity in a person's so-called self-interested concern to survive were called into question. As a consequence, the traditional philosophical focus on metaphysics gave rise to new normative and empirical inquiries about what matters in survival. In these new inquiries fundamental and potentially unsettling questions were raised, for the first time (and *as if* for the first time), about the significance of the distinction between self and other.

The revolutionary and controversial thesis that identity is *not* what matters primarily in survival has been a principal focus of the more recent debate. The version of this idea that has gotten by far the most attention is the normative thesis that identity is *not* what *should* matter primarily in survival. This normative thesis has been endorsed by several influential philosophers. Subsequently, however, other influential philosophers have vigorously defended the traditional idea that identity should matter primarily in survival, or at least that it is a precondition of what should matter primarily. Currently the traditional idea seems to have made a comeback.

In my view, the question of what matters in survival is crucial to philosophical self-understanding and, hence, needs to be discussed. However, I doubt that there is a feasible way of showing either that identity should matter primarily in survival or that it should not matter. I want,



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

then, to try to motivate a shift in the philosophical debate from the normative question of whether this or that should matter in survival to the largely descriptive question of what – that is rationally permissible – actually does or might be brought to matter. In my view, to many people, whose beliefs and values are rationally permissible, identity does not or will not on reflection matter primarily – at least, it will not matter at the familiar theoretical level at which we articulate our beliefs. However, it is not crucial to what I mainly want to say that I be right about this. For one thing, in addition to this theoretical level of belief, which is the only level that so far has been discussed in the debate over what matters in survival, there is also an experiential level at which beliefs or things that function as if they were beliefs make their presence felt; and, in my view, these experiential beliefs, or quasi-beliefs, throw into doubt virtually all of the conclusions about what matters in survival that have been advanced based just on a consideration of theoretical beliefs. For another, I do not intend to defend *any* thesis about what matters in survival but, rather, to provide a rationale and a model for a new kind of investigation of our deepest egoistic survival values, the ultimate purpose of which is not merely to discover what our values actually are, but to do that in a way that facilitates their transformation.

Had it not been for Derek Parfit's paper "Personal Identity" (1971), and subsequently his *Reasons and Persons* (1984), I would not have written the present book. Parfit showed me, perhaps without intending that any reader should draw such a lesson from his work, how to connect to the philosophical debate over personal identity what I had taken to be extra-philosophical reflections on the experience of self. Before Parfit's paper appeared I had been relatively uninterested in the analytic personal identity debate because of its preoccupation with what I regarded as trivial questions of conceptual analysis and because of its neglect of experience. Parfit showed me (and everyone else) how to make the transition from that traditional debate to the question of what matters in survival. He did this by taking the focus off of language (and conceptual analysis) and putting it squarely on questions about our deepest so-called egoistic values. It seemed (and still does seem) to me that it is but a short step from these values to experience. In the present book I take that step.

I have also learned a great deal from the writings and in some cases the patient criticism of several other personal identity theorists, particularly Sydney Shoemaker, Robert Nozick, John Perry, Peter Unger, Ernest Sosa, Stephen White, and Ingmar Persson. To varying degrees, their influence resonates throughout the present book.

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Several of the chapters that follow are developments and revisions of ideas I've published elsewhere (see References). I want, once again, to thank those who, through their comments or criticisms, helped with these earlier papers. These include: Michael Slote, Brian Garrett, Ernest Sosa, Peter Unger, Jerry Levinson, Richard Wollheim, Susan Wolf, Kadri Vihvelin, R. M. Hare, Denis Robinson, James Baillie, Stiv Fleishman, Daniel Kolak, Xiao-Guang Wang, Richmond Campbell, Sue Sherman, Duncan MacIntosh, Terry Tomkow, Nathan Brett, Steven Braude, Lydia Goehr, Robert Martin, Melinda Hogan, John Biro, Timothy Cleveland, Paul Sagal, Tara Brach, Tom Eigelsbach, Thomas W. Clark, Richard Hanley, and John Barresi.

In many cases what I've used from these earlier papers has been so substantially reworked for the present book that it is difficult now even for me to trace the connections. Still, there is a unity of purpose throughout these papers and this book. In the papers I was trying, not always successfully, to clear a philosophical space for the examination of certain issues having to do with the phenomenology of our most basic egoistic survival values. In this book, I've tried to explore these issues largely from the perspective of that space.

Many people have commented perceptively on earlier drafts of all or part of the present book. Over a period of six years John Barresi has shared with me his reactions to several incarnations of each of the chapters. His patient and perceptive criticisms and encouragement resulted in many improvements. Ingmar Persson, over a period of three years, went through several late versions of this book and made extensive written comments, as well as met with me for three days to talk about the question of what matters in survival. Although he may not accept some of my central claims and arguments, his detailed and insightful comments have led me to revise both in important ways. Thomas W. Clark, Kenneth Feigenbaum, and Paul Torek also each went through an entire late draft of the book and provided me with many helpful comments. I'm very grateful to each of these friends and also to many others, particularly to students who have attended my seminars over the years and who have helped and are unmentioned. In addition to these debts, in the Introduction and in the final chapter, I draw on work published originally in two papers, one of which I wrote jointly with John Barresi (1995) and the other with John and Alessandro Giovannelli (forthcoming). I am very grateful to John and Alessandro for allowing me to draw on this work we did together.

Finally, I thank everyone at Cambridge University Press who worked on this book for being so exceptionally competent and helpful, in particu-

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