

# Personal Identity and What Matters

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## 1. Introduction

Identity is not what prudentially matters in survival (this is originally and most famously argued in Parfit 1984, 245-280). Consider the case of division. *a* is one of three identical triplets. In World 1 his equipollent cerebral hemispheres are removed from his head and each is inserted into the (suitably emptied) skull of one of his brothers, resulting in the existence of two persons, *b* and *c*. In World 2, only one of his hemispheres is transplanted (while the other is destroyed), resulting in the existence of *b\**. Note that, assuming the necessity and transitivity of identity, *b\** is identical to neither *b* nor *c*.

Now, in World 1 *a* stands in the relation that matters to *b\** (indeed, it is plausible to claim that they are one and the same person). Furthermore, since in World 2, *a* stands in the exact same intrinsic physical and psychological relation to both *b* and *c*, he also stands in the relation that matters to each of them. But since he cannot be identical to two persons (who are not identical to each other), identity cannot be what matters in survival.

Furthermore, the conclusion that identity is not what matters is supported by our intuitions about what matters in cases of division. Consider World 2 again. Assume that *a* is informed that *b\** is going to be tortured terribly immediately after the brain transplant has been completed. Naturally, *a* is devastated. But now suppose that *a* learns that, as it turns out, both of his brain hemispheres are going to receive a new body, that is, that the actual world is World 1. Nevertheless, the person on the left branch is still going to be tortured terribly. Putting myself in *a*'s shoes, I am inclined to care just as much about *b*'s torture in World 1 as I would about *b\**'s torture in World 2. (While, to some extent, benefits to *c* may compensate for *b*'s torture in World 1, this would not affect my attitude to the *torture itself*). In other words, the existence of *c* (say, in some other wing of the hospital) does not change my attitude to the torture. And this suggests that the relation that matters is preserved equally well in both worlds, despite the fact that *a* only survives in one of them. And so it suggests that identity is not what matters.

Nevertheless, I now want to consider three recent objections to these arguments. I shall argue that they are not conclusive.

## 2. Survival, Existence and What Matters

My description of the case of division may seem to lead to absurdities. First, whether *a* continues to exist depends upon whether someone else, *c*, comes into existence. After all, in World 2, where *c* does not come into existence, *a* survives the transplant (*a* is identical to *b\**), whereas he does not survive in World 1. Second, whether *b* comes into existence also depends upon whether *c* comes into existence. *b* only comes into existence in World 1 because here, *c* does so as well (note that *b* and *b\** are not identical). And these judgements may seem quite absurd. After all, *c*'s existence does not causally affect *b*.

Of course, similar accounts of the identities of other types of objects (that can divide) have similar implications. And, in general, such accounts seem to me

quite plausible, or at least more plausible than alternative accounts. Regarding insentient objects, the fact that their persistence and existence may depend upon whether other causally unrelated objects come into existence does not seem disturbing. To a large extent, this is because their persistence conditions do not have the sort of significance the persistence conditions of persons have. Except maybe for legal reasons, it does not seem terribly important which of two ships is in fact Theseus' original ship. Now, this is controversial, but I shall merely assume that the implications are acceptable regarding insentient objects.

What makes it particularly difficult to believe that the persistence of *persons* may depend on causally unrelated matters is the apparent great significance of our survival. However, the crux of the above argument is that although *a* will cease to exist if *c* comes into existence, this sort of death does not matter from his perspective. Neither of *a*'s continuers will be him, but his relation to them will contain what matters. Therefore, the special sort of badness that is associated with the death of a person (but not with the death of a ship) does not even come into play. And so the absurdity of the first alleged absurdity may be more apparent than real.

The second alleged absurdity has received less attention in the literature. It does not concern the significance of identity over time, but of coming into existence in the first place. Why, exactly, is the second 'absurdity' thought to be absurd? According to Harold Noonan we could say to *b*: "You should consider yourself fortunate that the other fellow's brain transplant [that is, *c*'s brain transplant] went so well - if it hadn't you would never have existed" (Noonan 1989, p. 160). But why claim that *b* is *fortunate*? Just as it does not matter from *a*'s point of view whether his future continuers are identical to him, as long as the relevant relations hold between him and them, it may be claimed that it does not matter from *b*'s point of view whether the person who comes into existence in the *b*-body is *b*. After all, if all the nonexistence of *b* would really amount to would be the nonexistence of *c*, then why should nonexistence matter from *b*'s perspective? This, I think, takes some of the sting out of the second absurdity as well.

Let me briefly elaborate on this point. Noonan holds World 1 to be better than World 2 from what we may call *b*'s prudential point of view. This is because *b* exists in the former world but not in the latter. But the existence of *b* depends in a very intimate way on the existence of *c*. This is clear when we consider that World 2 contains everything that is needed for the existence of *b* *except* the existence of *c*. Furthermore, while *c* enables the existence of *b* in World 1, this is not in virtue of any causal relations between them. Rather, it is the *mere* existence of *c* that brings *b* into existence here.

In the light of these connections between the existence of *b* and the existence of *c*, can we maintain that, since *b* exists in World 1 but not in World 2, World 1 is better from *b*'s prudential point of view? Such a claim would not be incoherent. Nevertheless, it seems to me very hard to believe. The difference between World 1 and World 2 in virtue of which *b* exists in the former but not in the latter is simply that (the causally isolated) *c* exists in

the former but not in the latter. And why should the existence of *c* make a difference from *b*'s prudential point of view?

### 3. Division and Indeterminacy

According to Mark Johnston and Peter Unger, the case of division does not support the claim that identity is not what matters (Johnston 1997, pp. 169-170, Unger 1990, pp. 255-259). They hold that in World 1, it is not determinately true that *a* ceases to exist. This is because it is neither determinately true that *a* is identical to (for instance) *b*, nor determinately true that they are not identical. Indeed, *almost* all of what ordinary survival consists in is present in World 1 - all that prevents *a*'s survival is that he stands in the relevant relation to both *b* and *c*. Therefore, *a*'s prudential concern for *b* (and *c*) is a reasonable extension of his concern for himself. So while identity is what matters, a person's concern for himself (and so for identity) may in certain rather bizarre situations be extended to people to whom he is not (determinately) identical.

However, I am inclined to hold that it is, in fact, determinately true that *a* is not identical to *b* (or *c* for that matter). This is not because I believe that statements about identity always have determinate answers. In a spectrum of gradual physical and psychological changes where a person is dismantled one cell at the time, I believe that there is a range in which it is neither true that the person ceases to exist, nor true that he does not cease to exist. But it seems to me that the case of division is relevantly different. Here, we have a clear reason to claim that *a* is not identical to *b* or *c*. He cannot be, since neither has the stronger claim to being identical to *a*.

Furthermore, the view that it is not determinately true that *a* is not identical to *b*, and not determinately true that *a* is not identical to *c* has counterintuitive implications. Intuitively, there is one and only one person inhabiting the *a*-body before division takes place. However, if it is not determinately true that *a* is not identical to *b* and not identical to *c*, then there is no determinate answer to the question of how many persons there are in the *a*-body at this stage. Therefore, it is not determinately true that there is only one person inhabiting the *a*-body prior to division (Garrett 1998, p. 64).

Finally, I believe that it is uneconomical to claim that what matters is identity, but that the concern for oneself can be extended to beings one is not determinately identical to. Suppose that we correctly believe that a particular criterion of personal identity is true, say, a psychological criterion, according to which personal identity consists in non-branching psychological continuity. And suppose that we hold that what matters is the sort of psychological continuity referred to in this criterion, regardless of whether it branches or not. The difference between our view of what matters and the view that identity is what matters will then consist merely in the fact that the latter view has a clause to rule out branching. Which view should we accept?

I noted that my attitude to the torture of *b* would be no different than my attitude to the torture of *b\**. The existence or nonexistence of a further continuer, besides the one who will be tortured, will not make a difference (or more precisely, it will not make a difference to my attitude to the *torture*). But this means that the fact that in World 2, psychological continuity takes a *non-branching* form is irrelevant for my attitude towards the torture.

In other words, the fact that the relevant relation holds uniquely does not seem to make a difference. So it

appears that we can account for our value judgements merely by invoking the view that what matters is psychological continuity *whether or not branching occurs*.

Why, then, claim that uniqueness matters? We do not need to claim this in order to explain our judgements. And since the only difference between our view of what matters and the view that identity is what matters is that the latter includes a clause to rule out branching, it seems that the former view is superior. In particular, it is uneconomical to claim that what matters is identity and that in cases of indeterminacy the concern for oneself is extended to one's continuer(s). At best, this would be to assign a role to uniqueness in which it makes no difference.

### 4. Other values

There is one final objection I want to consider. Brian Garrett has argued that even if we do not consider division as bad as ordinary death, this does not support the claim that identity is not what matters (Garrett 1998, pp. 92-93). Rather, this merely means that given the choice between ordinary death and division, we would choose division. And there may be reasons for preferring division other than the judgement that identity is not what matters. Garrett suggests the following: if *a* divides, *b* and *c* can complete his public projects (those of his projects that others can complete). That is, *b* and *c* can, say, finish his book, look after his family etc.

I agree with Garrett that even if we prefer division to ordinary death, this does not prove that identity does not matter. However, I made a stronger claim than that division is preferable to ordinary death. I argued that *a*'s attitude to future torture is not likely to change just because he is informed that it will be *b* rather than *b\** who receives it. If this is correct, then *a*'s attitude to the torture will not depend on whether he is identical to the recipient or not. And this suggests that identity does not matter.

This, of course, is compatible with the other claim that Garrett makes, namely that the completion of public projects matters. Both *b* and *b\** may complete *a*'s public projects, and this fact may provide part of the reason why they matter to *a*. But note that even if it is important to *a* that someone completes his public projects, this need not be because this someone prudentially matters to *a*. It may be because the completion of these projects matters in the sense that his strivings will then not have been in vain, and so his life will have been *better*. Or it may even be because these projects matter in what we might call an 'impersonal' or 'other-regarding sense'. Perhaps it is important to *a* that someone takes care of his family, not because it either benefits him or someone else to whom he stands in the relation that prudentially matters, but simply because it makes his *family* better off.

In conclusion, I believe that none of the three objections pulls through. Identity is not what matters.

### References

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