Review Article

Points of Concern

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SECTION 1: The Argument of *Self-Concern*

Raymond Martin's *Self-Concern* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998)[1] sets out to put the debate around personal identity on to a new footing. He acknowledges the ground-breaking work of Derek Parfit which shifted the general focus from questions of strict identity to the question of what it is that really should matter in survival, but he thinks the focus should shift further than just this. His book sets out to endorse '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 … actually does or might be brought to matter' (x).

The roots of his objection to the new orthodoxy represented by Parfit are methodological. Since Locke began the debate on what makes someone the same person over time, almost all philosophers who have got involved have made use of thought-experiments to establish their view and to challenge those of their rivals. Parfit is no exception. Indeed, his major contribution – the move from a focus on identity to a focus on egoistic survival values – was based entirely on one of these 'puzzle cases'. In the thought-experiment he called 'My Division', Parfit imagined himself being split into two distinct people (Parfit 1984: 254). In such a case, the logic of identity rules that neither of these two resulting people could *be* Parfit, and yet (Parfit argued) their relationships to the original person contain all that matters in survival. His conclusion was that identity could not be what matters in survival, and that we should rather concern ourselves with what does matter. Martin agrees that survival values and not identity should be our central focus, but disagrees with Parfit's way of establishing this. He is not out to follow Kathleen Wilkes in rejecting all thought-experiments of this kind (Wilkes 1988: chapter 1), but he does think that this method cannot establish what we *should* value – in the sense of what is rationally required, as Parfit wants it to – but only what actually matters to particular individuals. And besides,

Parfit's case is too vulnerable to counter-attack. Martin acknowledges Peter Unger's charge that it will be preferable that *I* survive, rather than two people physically and psychologically continuous with me.

Martin's alternative route to survival values as the focus is a thought-experiment he calls 'Fission Rejuvenation' (53-54). John, who undergoes fission rejuvenation is a healthy twenty-year-old with prospects of a long and happy life. Under suitable hospital conditions, his brain is removed from his body and divided into two functionally equivalent halves (as in Parfit's original case, the possibility of this is claimed to follow from the ability of actual stroke victims to recover all their psychology with only half an operative brain). A microcomputer together with a radio transmitter is attached to the one half and a corresponding receiver and microcomputer to the other half. Each half is then placed into a new body qualitatively identical to John's old one. A, the body with the transmitter, undergoes a period of recuperation after which he emerges just as John was before the operation except that he knows of the operation and of the existence of his doppelgänger. B is kept unconscious, and his body in a state of unaging limbo. The computer in A's brain continually scans and transmits the information there, and the receiving computer in B's brain alters it accordingly so that B's brain, apart from being unconscious, is in the same state as A's. Thirty years later, A dies of a heart attack. At that instant, a signal is sent to B's brain which activates it and B then goes through the same recuperation process A did before. B emerges with a body just like John's but psychologically just like A, and then continues to live and age in the normal way.

As was the case with Parfit's thought-experiment, the presence of duplicates (even if one is unconscious for the period of their simultaneous existence) militates against either of them being identical with John. The difference which Martin wishes to highlight is that John (and people who share his values) can quite rationally choose to undergo fission rejuvenation rather than to continue as the same person – on the grounds that continuing in this way will be preferable to normal survival. And so, contra Unger, strict survival does not always trump other ways of continuing; or, to put it the old way, identity is not always what matters. Parfit's aim has been fulfilled, but as part of a new and achievable programme. I will return to these issues in detail in Section 2.

The preference for fission rejuvenation over normal survival with identity is not the only way in which survival values might be revealed or induced to change. Martin also argues that many people

would prefer to transform into the person they would rather be (or, better, would most like to be) than to persist, should the technology be available to bring this about. That is, they would prefer to undergo psychological or physical reshaping such that we could no longer call them the same person (under the standard accounts of *same person*) because of the desirable psychological or physical features the resulting person would have rather than to carry on as they are and thus retain identity. They would trade off identity for these features, reflecting again that identity is not all that matters to people. Martin argues that this would be a rational trade-off from the original person's point of view as long as they could 'rationally fully identify' with the person they would become – that is, as long as they can rationally anticipate having the resulting person's experiences and performing their actions, even though they know it will not be *them* doing so.

There are thus a number of hypothetical situations in which people might, given their egoistic survival values, rationally have 'identificatory surrogates'. That is, says Martin, 'at least at the level of theoretical belief, our so-called egoistic survival values are, at bottom, not really egoistic at all but, rather, at most, "continueristic"' (94). Many of us are rationally more concerned to continue than to survive. The next question is what determines how we discriminate between those 'others' who are and are not appropriate surrogates for ourselves.

Martin is at pains to point out that this is an empirical question, and not the sort of question that philosophers interested in personal identity have typically bothered about – as opposed to philosophers interested in the more obviously cognitive parts of philosophy of mind (94-5). The answer will come from psychology, not metaphysics. Martin's answer (though unnervingly based in armchair thought [95-124], given this introduction) is that there is no objective source for our decision. It lies rather in our *subjective* relations to others. The continuers you regard as appropriate surrogates are those to whom you direct dispositions you would normally only direct to yourself (127) – those who you feel are and treat as yourself, even if you know they are not. They must be 'close-enough' continuers in salient dimensions, though.

In the final chapter, he offers his explanation of why our self-regarding dispositions will take others as their objects in certain hypothetical situations while they usually are only directed on ourselves. He suggests the explanation lies in a peculiar – and illusory – feature of our experience. Part of any normal experience of yours is a sense

(a feeling) that there is a hidden perceiver in the experience, although it is not one of the objects of the experience, and a sense that this perceiver is you. You take the hidden perceiver to be a self – a fixed, stable, continuous observer and this is the illusory feature. Ever since Hume, philosophers have realised that there is no such thing to be found. Martin points out that in esoteric 'no-self' experiences as reported by meditators like Krishnamurti, and some of our more common sensually overwhelming experiences this 'perceiver-self phenomenon' is missing. Krishnamurti's claim that the self is an illusion has a basis in these experiences, rather than in the sort of theoretical considerations of Hume.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon is a striking feature of most of our experiences and it is the 'self' as experienced in this way that we project (probably unconsciously) into the experiences of the person we are hypothesising to emerge after the operation of a brain-state-transfer device, teletransporter, fission rejuvenator, or whatever (145). And it is here that the answer to why we either do or do not identify ourselves with our hypothetical continuers is to be found. Our self-regarding dispositions can be moved from ourselves to take others as their objects because it is only at a theoretical level that we regard them as others. At the experiential level, where the perceiver-self phenomenon occurs, we may well regard them as ourselves – we may have a 'quasi-belief' to this effect. It is at this level that what really matters is to be found. Our egoistic survival values may well be based on an illusion, then. We will not be able to remove this illusion from our experience, but we must realise that it may encourage us to have false beliefs about our identity – as was the case with the belief that identity is what matters first and foremost.

SECTION 2: A Response

Martin does not claim to be offering a new substantial account of what matters (x). The claim he does press strongly for his book is that he is laying the grounds for approaching the topic in a new way, and that the old way represented by Parfit is inadequate. It is these claims that will be my focus. I wish to argue that his new way is not significantly different from the old, and that his criticism of Parfit's method is anyway inadequate to make us want to change.

Martin is sympathetic to much of what Parfit had to say. He cites Parfit as the philosopher who showed him the way to his own contri-

bution to the debate (x). He lauds what I have outlined as the crucial conclusion Parfit drew from My Division: that identity is not what matters in survival. But, as outlined in Section 1, he has two central complaints concerning Parfit's handling of the whole issue. First, he feels that Parfit's argument in support of this conclusion is far too vulnerable to counterattack, and suggests what he sees as a preferable means to the same end. Second, he believes that Parfit shifts the debate in a mistaken manner in the light of this important conclusion. I will come back to the first complaint; here the second, potentially more devastating one, needs further explanation.

Parfit's breakthrough was the claim that identity is not what matters in survival. Our concern should then be to argue not about strict identity, but rather about what *does* matter in survival. This is where Martin wants his path to diverge from Parfit's. He contends that the method of thought-experiment which Parfit employs can only support conclusions about what does actually matter to people. It is just a fact that different people respond differently to the puzzle cases philosophers like Parfit outline. Thus we can use them to investigate what matters to a particular individual – but the method cannot support conclusions about what *ought rationally* matter to everyone, and *that* is what Parfit sets out to establish:

> He thinks he can show that all of us should value just psychological connections between ourselves now and people in the future. Unger too is in this tradition. He thinks he can show that all of us should value certain sorts of physical connections between ourselves now and people in the future. (63)

Martin calls this quest which is at odds with its own method *survival-value imperialism*. In its place he sets himself the more humble task of clarifying and ultimately perhaps transforming our basic egoistic survival values (30), and suggests that this is what the personal identity debate should now take as its focus.

Despite this statement of intent, it is not at all clear that the debate does change significantly in Martin's hands. What does happen is that the claims he makes in response to the thought-experiments he runs come with the qualifiers, 'for most of us', or 'for many'. Rather than concluding in the light of a thought-experiment that we do not believe that continuity of the same brain is necessary for our survival, Martin would conclude that *most of us* do not believe this. What he does not do is to indulge in empirical research to discover how many people think what, but instead defends what it would be ratio-

nal for many people to think. As a result, the game seems strikingly similar to what it was before. This impression is reinforced by the fact that in a number of places, even these qualifiers are dropped, and the arguments sound *exactly* like they did in the old days. Consider the discussion as to whether or not the organs that sustain our psychologies have a derivative value as a result of doing so (80-81). Martin describes a scenario in which it is discovered that your psychology has functioned on only half of your brain, and that that half is diseased and will soon cease to function. But with a quick and simple procedure your psychology can be switched into the other half with no resultant complications. He asks how much it would matter to you that the original brain half was no longer doing the work. His conclusion: 'So much for the derivative value of the organs that have actually sustained our psychologies' (81). Just in case that does not strike you as the claim of a survival-value imperialist, he continues in a way which is to all intents and purposes typical of such a thinker. He outlines how 'those who are skeptical of this response' might react, and argues why they would be wrong. Only at the very end of the argument (82) do we find a 'most people' slipped in, far too late to be playing any significant role in the case. Those used to the old debate can feel quite at home here.

Martin's complaint against Parfit's 'My Division' in particular is that it is vulnerable to the criticism that it does not succeed in showing that there may be ways of continuing that are almost as good as (strict) survival. He points to the challenges along these lines made by Unger and Ernest Sosa. Unger, for instance, contends that 'no case that lacks strict survival will be as good as any case in which the original person himself does survive' (Unger 1990: 211-2). This contention has immediate plausibility – faced with a case of yourself undergoing fission, it does seem preferable if only one offshoot survives. While Parfit's case is open to this challenge, Martin believes his 'Fission Rejuvenation' is not (as well as not being guilty of imperialism).

That, at any rate, is how Martin would have us understand things. We need to take a more careful look at some of the steps he takes, however, before we rush to join his cause. Perhaps the place to start is his criticism of Parfit's case as vulnerable to attacks like Unger's. In the first place, Unger does not really set out in the role in which Martin casts him of attempting to re-instate identity as what matters. He points out that some people hold that identity does not matter at all in survival while at the other extreme some hold that identity is all that matters. His claim that cases of strict survival (i.e. identity) are always

preferable to those that lack it is a way of stating his own 'realistic compromise view of what matters' (Unger 1990: 211). It is worth noting that he distances himself from the view that identity is all that matters, because that serves to remind us what Parfit's fission argument was all about – about showing that this 'strict view of what matters' (to borrow Unger's phrase) is wrong.

The way in which Martin uses Unger to criticise My Division makes us lose sight of Parfit's quarry, which was the nonreductionist – one who believes that personal identity is a simple relation which cannot be reduced to some more familiar relation like physical or psychological continuity. Parfit set up My Division as an attack on the view that it is identity alone which matters, which he sees as a pillar of nonreductionism – the two doctrines 'stand or fall together' (1984: 216). Parfit thus intended to show that nonreductionism is wrong in claiming solely that 'what is judged to be important … is whether … there will be someone living who will *be me*' (1984: 215). That this *can sometimes* be important is neither here nor there in Parfit's attempt to show that it is *not all-important* and in that way to strike a blow against nonreductionism.[2] But that identity can sometimes be important is all that Unger's claim implies, and thus that this can be said against Parfit's thought-experiment should hardly be a cause for worry.

This pushes us to the next step, which is to consider whether Fission Rejuvenation is really a better way than My Division of showing that identity is not what matters, as Martin claims it to be (56). Consider first what Fission Rejuvenation is in a position to show us given Martin's strictures on the limits of thought-experiment. Since thought-experiments can only reveal what matters to individuals and others who happen to share their values, the best that Fission Rejuvenation can show is that identity is not actually important to everyone. It may nevertheless be rationally all-important to *you* if you are not like John or Raymond Martin in not sharing their survival values and thus reacting differently with regard to whether continuing as A and then B would be preferable to being just John.

Now consider what My Division is in a position to show us. On the way to getting an understanding of this, what immediately stands out is that the argument in which it is placed has a form very different from that of Fission Rejuvenation. It will be worth taking a brief look at how Parfit actually presents the case. He outlines the hypothetical scenario first:

> *My Division*. My body is fatally injured as are the brains of my two brothers. My brain is divided, and each half is successfully transplanted into the

> body of one of my brothers. Each of the resulting people believes he is me, seems to remember living my life, has my character, and is in every other way psychologically continuous with me. And he has a body that is very like mine. (Parfit 1984: 254)

Following this, he asks what can be said about what happens to him. 'There are only four possibilities: (1) I do not survive; (2) I survive as one of the two people; (3) I survive as the other; (4) I survive as both' (1984: 256). He then argues that there are strong objections to each of these descriptions, and yet they are the only options for the nonreductionist to whom identity is always what matters. 'On the reductionist view, the problem disappears. On this view, … these claims are merely different descriptions of the same outcome' (1984: 259).

In this argument we are not faced with a choice between which of two outcomes we find best fits our survival values. The point of his thought-experiment is not to draw forth an answer to the question of whether you would rather continue as you are or split into two. The point is rather to illustrate some fundamental tensions – tensions between the assumption that identity is what is at issue and some fundamental (logical and other) principles. On the assumption that identity is what is at issue, we are obliged to offer one of the four descriptions of what has happened to him which Parfit outlines. The problem is that (4) conflicts with the principle of the necessity of identity (one thing cannot be two), (2) and (3) conflict with the principle that identity cannot be an arbitrary matter, and the last with the principle that 'a double success cannot be a failure'. (This last may not strike you as a fundamental logical principle. But there is a conflict with one of these lurking in Parfit's discussion of the problem with this description. It conflicts with the principle of the intrinsic nature of identity – the principle that who you are cannot depend on whether or not *somebody else* exists). These principles are not a matter of subjective survival values; they are fundamental in the sense that to give them up would have devastating consequences for the basics of logic and metaphysics amongst other things.

My point is that My Division is not an intuition-pump for producing your survival values. It is rather a *reductio* of the assumption that identity is the crucial issue in the debate. While not going the whole way of showing that assumption to lead to contradiction, it sets out to show that the costs of accepting it are too high in terms of the principles we must reject in order to retain it. Of course, this does not disprove it once and for all – we can (for theoretical reasons) choose to pay those costs and reject those principles as the Duhem-Quine thesis

reminds us.[3] But that choice is not at all like the one Martin's thought-experiment offers, as discussed above. Martin's thought-experiment *is* of the kind he describes in rejecting the method of thought-experiment as a way to reaching general conclusions. As a result, My Division is in a position to show us much more than Fission Rejuvenation can – it can show all of us that identity need not be the only issue when it comes to questions of survival. And this all suggests that Martin's charge of survival-value imperialism is quite out of place in this particular context. It is also worth noting that, working as a reductio, the thought-experiment is not open to the worries that Martin's claim that our intuitions about ourselves may have an illusory base might raise.

Martin has indeed brought aspects of our experience not normally discussed by analytic philosophers into the central debate concerning personal identity. Krishnamurti is certainly a name not found in bibliographies in the literature. Nevertheless, my argument is that the claims for novelty which his book makes so strongly are not nearly as well-founded as one would desire.

NOTES

1. Raymond Martin, *Self-Concern: An Experiential Approach to What Matters in Survival*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. All page references are to this work unless otherwise indicated.
2. Parfit openly acknowledges that identity can sometimes be important (1984: 263-4).
3. Parfit himself ends up in rejecting one of the principles involved – the intrinsicness of identity – because he argues that all plausible accounts of our identity will conflict with it (1984: 266-273). But that is not part of the argument under discussion, and the principle is certainly one that those who believe that identity is what matters would believe to be also a fundamental principle.

REFERENCES

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