

# COMMENTARY ON “AFFECT, AGENCY, AND ENGAGEMENT”

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IN *REASONS AND PERSONS* Derek Parfit claims that “our identity is not what matters” (Parfit 1984, 245). This would come as a surprise to many psychiatric patients. Parfit might maintain that coming to believe this claim would be therapeutic, and indeed it sometimes seems that he uses his reductionism as a kind of personal therapy. But in this very lucid paper Peter Binns argues that Parfit has not made his case. It seems clear at any rate that personal identity is a matter of immediate moment for many people, especially those in whom the sense of self is threatened (and who are therefore likely to seek psychotherapy).

True, the self-identical self is a difficult sort of thing to discover. This problem, as Binns points out, goes back to Hume:

I can never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.... If anyone, upon serious and unprejudiced reflection, thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular.... But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. (Hume 1911, 239)

But suppose we ask, Who is this “I” that can never catch itself without a perception, and what

is it like to try to catch oneself in this way? It hardly seems necessary to press a point that announces itself so clearly in the very posing of this question—Hume’s account leaves out an essential feature of the situation, referred to by Binns as *engagement*, in contrast to the detachment recommended by Parfit. The subject, or agent, of the activities of trying to catch, of affirming or thinking, and of reasoning or not being able to reason has to have a vantage point from which to engage in them (or, better, *is* this vantage point) and in recognizing this recognizes itself. This requires no effort of discovery. The subject is *engaged with* a content (and thus isn’t “without” something like a perception—so far Hume is right), but that doesn’t make it *into* the content (that’s where he goes wrong). In being conscious of something, to use a formula of Sartre’s, the subject is prereflectively conscious of itself (Sartre 1958, xxix).

It is a curiosity of contemporary philosophy that there does seem to be, as Hume suggests, some mutual blindness on this issue: from pragmatists such as Quine to antisubjective structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss or Foucault, to cognitive eliminativists such as the Churchlands, to reductionists such as Parfit, there is an array of writers who seem to have forgotten, in the words of an older tradition, that they are existing individuals. They all freely say “I,” but seem not to mean anything identifiable by it; for some it

reduces to a merely grammatical function. But such a function cannot be a carrier for affect or agency or engagement, and it is the inescapable claim of this side of personal experience that Binns stresses in this text.

Hume suggests that in the face of this misunderstanding we can only throw up our hands. Binns takes a less despairing course and engages the reductionist side in argument, partly on its own terms but partly in the light of clinical evidence. If philosophy in the person of some of its practitioners claims that identity is not what matters, psychiatry will insist that, among other things, it certainly is. In carrying this reminder

back into their own camp, philosophers such as Binns exemplify the fruitfulness of the alliance between the two fields.

#### REFERENCES

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