

What Matters in Survival: Self-determination and The Continuity of Life Trajectories

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that standard psychological continuity theory does not account for an important feature of what is important in survival – being and remaining a person. I offer a theory that can account for this, and I explain how it avoids two other implausible consequences of standard psychological continuity theory, as well as having certain other advantages over that theory.

1. Introduction¹

The problem of personal identity can be defined by the following question: given the amount a person changes over their lifetime, what would make it true that they in fact endure or persist over time? The modern answer is that there must be certain relation(s) connecting the earlier ways a person once was to the ways they are now that, despite any changes, the holding of these connections entails that a person retains their identity.²

From a contemporary scientific point of view, if persons are anything, they are psychological-physical objects. If so, being the same person over time consists in being the same psychological-physical object over time. However, we tend to think of a person's psychology as distinct from a person's physical body. If this is true, this raises the issue of whether both, or one or the other matter most in survival. And, in fact, most agree that persons need to retain one of these – their psychologies.

The standard account of what is required to have the same psychology over time, also called "psychological continuity" theory is that if there are the right kinds, and enough of the right kinds of connections between the psychological states a person once had and the psychological states that person now has, then that person is a psychologically continuous being, and therefore survives changes over the passage of time – retains their identity. The standard theory of the nature of psychological continuity is that a person has it just in case their adjacent psychological

¹ For the sake of neutrality, the singular pronoun 'they' and its variants will be used throughout.

² This assumes that the puzzle about whether change over time is possible has been resolved and resolved in favor of a relational theory of identity preservation over time.

states are connected via relations of similarity, and their current psychological states causally or counterfactually depend upon their earlier psychological states.³

While I accept that psychological continuity is fundamental for having what is important for survival, I reject the idea that retaining personal identity over time can be exhausted by the it. As I argue, this is due to its missing something important in person's survival – that of being a person. To remedy this, I offer an alternative account I call the "life trajectory" account.⁴

In Section 2, after briefly reviewing certain well-known facts about standard psychological continuity, and I explain my own commitments. In Section 3, I offer one motivation for an alternative account that depends on a thought experiment that reveals our underlying commitments about the nature of persons, and I argue for why this is important. In Section 4, I develop the life trajectory theory in detail, and in Section 5 I explain its advantages. Section 6 addresses three objections.

2. Psychological Continuity Theory and Personal Identity

Despite its compelling nature, as standardly conceived, psychological continuity theory has problems. For example, as it turns out that it fails as an account of personal identity for 2 reasons: first, it can be multiply instantiated – more than one later person can have an earlier person's psychology; second, it can come in degree.⁵ But an individual cannot be partly identical to itself – it either is or is not.⁶ So, both features violate the requirements for a relation to count as an identity relation. Nevertheless, our intuitions tell us that if we have a case in which only one earlier and later person's psychology remains intact, we have what is important in survival.⁷ Furthermore, we

³ See Lewis (1983) for this characterization. See Shoemaker (1970) for problems with the causal-connectedness requirement, and MacIntosh (1993) for problems with the similarity requirement.

⁴ See Parfit (2012) who accepts that survival fundamentally involves being a person. His account, however, does not address the issues I raise in what follows.

⁵ See Schetchman (2001) for more detailed discussion.

⁶ The first fact is illustrated by considering "fission" scenarios, discussed by Parfit (1971:5), but earlier considered by Williams (1976) and Wiggins (1967).

⁷ For theorists who resist the idea that fission threatens identity, see Carroll (2011); Demarest (2016); and Lewis (1983).

also still believe that psychology is what is important while at the same time acknowledging that it comes in degree.⁸ How can this be explained?

2.2 What Matters in Survival

One solution is Parfit's who paradoxically, and startlingly concludes that identity, or being the same person over time, is not important for survival (1984: 261-265; 1995: 21-22). Parfit claims that it seems undoubtedly true that what is important is our psychology, but this is inconsistent with identity mattering. So, we must give up the former idea. Parfit shifts the issue of personal identity to that of something's mattering in our survival.⁹

Many have accepted Parfit's conclusion. These theorists are also known as non-identity theorists. But if identity does not matter in survival, what else would? Some relation that is somehow looser than an identity relation, but that also allows earlier and later persons to identify those later person's as their continuants. A neutral characterization of what matters in survival could be stated like this:

Having What Matters in Survival

(1) A later person B has what matters in the future survival of an earlier person A only if the relations that hold between B and A allow B to identify with A's past in the same way as if B were identical to A.

(2) A later person B has what matters in the past survival of a later person A only if the relations that hold between A and B allow A to identify with B in the future as if B were identical to A.¹⁰

To get a better grasp on these conditions consider this example: assume an earlier subject A is not identical to a later subject B. Now imagine that A is told that they will soon die, so they have their brain cryogenically preserved to maintain its integrity. A is told that their brain will later be

⁸ For more discussion of the details of Parfit's arguments, along with issues about interpretation, see Johansson (2010), and Schetchman (1996) who develops the objection that this cannot be a criterion on having what matters since it does not allow us to distinguish self-interested from other-interested concern. Williams (1973) too offers an objection based on similar concerns.

⁹ It should be noted that Parfit is not consistent in his use of the term 'survival'. 'Survival' sometimes stands for persistence (1984), while at other times, he drives a wedge between the two concepts (1971). I will follow the more natural (1984) use.

¹⁰ I give only minimal conditions here, since I do not wish to rule out a priori different theories of what matters in conditions for survival. The term 'identify' is used for the same reasons. For other definitions of what matters, see Martin (1995), Perry (1976), and Unger (2003), among others.

transplanted to another subject B who suffered brain death from a car accident.

Imagine that one of A's current desires is to own and renovate an old house. Suppose that B's does so later and sees this as satisfying A's past desire. B therefore meets condition (1) for having what matters in A's survival. And now consider A who currently has the mentioned desire. If A believes that B will complete the renovation of an old house, and they anticipate this as the satisfaction of their current desire, A therefore meets condition (2).¹¹

2.3 Why It Really Does Not Matter That Identity Does Not Matter

I too, accept a non-identity theory. However, not on the grounds of the first observation, but instead on the grounds of second one, as well as an observation of Butler's (1736) concerning Locke's (1694) memory theory of identity.

Locke's view -pre- the originator of the psychological view (1694) -- was that a later subject is identical to an earlier subject just in case the later subject remembers being the earlier subject also known the memory theory of personal identity. Butler's (1736) concern was that the theory was uninformative, since a later subject can only remember being an earlier subject if it is already known that the later subject is identical to the earlier subject. Butler assumed that mental states count as memories only if they accurately portray a subject's past experiences. To say then, that a subject remembers an event, entails that that subject experienced that event. Butler concludes that Locke's memory theory is, therefore, question-begging.

In response to Butler's original objection to the memory criterion, some writers – most notably Shoemaker (1970) – introduced a different notion of memory that does not require identity. On Shoemaker's account, which Parfit also draws on, these mental states are described as "quasi-memories," or as "q-memories." These are mental states that a subject who inherits them from an earlier one cannot distinguish as not being their own. That is there is no discernible

¹¹ The reason for both forward and backward-looking requirements for having what matters in survival should now be clear, since the transplant's success is not guaranteed. For more arguments for both criteria see Schetchman (2001).

qualitative difference between memories and q-memories. This allowed non-identity theorists to accept a psychological view the requirement of having one the the same psychological relations, some at least, could be merely q-psychological relations.

3. Why Personhood Requires More than Having a Psychology

Consider now what I call “virtual immersion scenarios.” These involve isolating a psychological subject from their external environment in certain ways their psychology remains intact. It follows that if psychological continuity theory is correct, then no virtual immersion scenario should threaten having what matters in survival, but there are such cases.

3.1 The Experience Machine

At least one virtual immersion case involves what Nozick (1998) calls the “experience machine,” which can provide a person with an endless supply of desirable, but illusory, life experiences. In this scenario, a subject’s psychology remains fully intact, but most react negatively to the idea of being in the experience machine. In fact, many of us, I believe, would in fact recoil in horror at the prospect of entering it, viewing the subject who does so as mere simulacrum of what they once were.¹² Nozick’s explanation of this reaction is that we value more than merely experiencing ourselves as having done certain things, we also want those experiences to be veridical or authentic – to be accurate representations of our interactions with our surrounding environment. But why should veridicality or authenticity matter? It does not seem to be of intrinsic value.

3.2 Persons and Self-Determined Lives

One explanation is that having veridical experiences contributes to having a life of self-determination that a psychological subject effectively directs or governs – at least one way of conceiving of the concept of having free will. To effectively direct or govern a life, a psychological subject must, at least, take an active stance towards that life and to non-accidentally or reliably shape its direction. This at least requires a director that is epistemically and practically rational –

¹² The fact that the situation portrayed in “The Matrix” is at all disturbing is proof that many people have negative reactions to virtual immersion.

whose beliefs are based largely on perceiving the world as it is, and who bases their actions on what would satisfy their desires based on those beliefs.¹³ The veridicality of a psychological subject's experience is important, then, since its systematic lack would threaten a subject's ability to live the life they choose – to exercise their free will.¹⁴ Because the experience machine makes subjects mere passive experiencers, any sense that the subject in the experience machine has of exercising their free will must be illusory – determined by the machine, not the subject. A psychological subject that enters the experience machine, then, loses the status as that of being a person.

The idea that what defines being a person is that of having a free will is not without precedent. Frankfurt (1971), for instance, proposes the idea that having free will is what distinguishes persons from what he calls “wantons.” And Aristotle's notion of persons (or “humans” in his terms) in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. Rowe 2002) involves having rational capacities and effectively exercising those capacities. By these standards, a being in Nozick's experience machine, would not be a person, and I claim that being a person matters in survival.¹⁵ Given that we are studying what matters in the survival of persons, it simply seems to be a conceptual fact that remaining a person is essential to having it.

4. The Life Trajectory Theory of What Matters in Survival

A person – in the sense in which I understand this notion – that continues over time, whether this sustains equivalence relations or not, creates what I will call a “life trajectory.” This is the path of a psychological subject through an external environment individuated by that psychological subject's extrinsic relations to their environment.¹⁶ It is a trajectory that begins with an action that

¹³ That believing based on evidence enhances autonomy was emphasized by Kant (1785), and which is also part of the reason for why he believed lying to be wrong.

¹⁴ For arguments that having plans and projects are important for having what matters in survival, see Perry (1976). See Wolf for arguments that knowledge is required for the exercise of free will (1986).

¹⁵ Olson (2010) would disagree. For Olson, what matters in survival is not a sortal. For considerations against this claim, see Rudder Baker (1999), and Parfit (2012).

¹⁶ This idea is put forward in McDowell (1997) although for several reasons, as well as supporting

counts as one that is self-determining and is so shaped afterwards. As before, being self-determining requires being embedded within an external context in particular ways. I claim that external relations therefore must play a key role in any account of what matters in survival.

4.1 The Extrinsic Properties of a Life Trajectory and What Matters in Survival

Because external relations play a key role in having a life trajectory – what matters in survival – I will now explore their nature. Consider for instance the following extrinsic properties that I have. Currently, I have the short-lived extrinsic properties of drinking a kickstart and smoking a cigarette, as well as typing on my keyboard. In contrast, I also have the more longer-lived properties being the custodian of one Catahoula rescue and one McNab Shepherd rescue, and of living at a certain address. Even further, there are other properties I have that I will always have, such as being the sole author of this paper, as well as being the agent of whatever intentional action created my life trajectory. All these properties individuate my specific life trajectory, at least, currently. Only certain ones, however, as I explain, can do so over time – those I have for the duration of my lifespan. Because these relations do not depend on the continued holding of any relations between myself and my environment, it is these properties that make for a single continuous trajectory over time, and therefore, it is these latter properties that matter in survival.

Furthermore, these properties, which I call “permanent” extrinsic properties, matter intuitively. They are part of what gives a person a sense of continuity over time – of what grounds their current identification with a past subject, and they are part of what sustains their identification with a future subject as anticipated as continuing to have these properties.¹⁷

an anti-reductionist hypothesis. Marya Schetchman has recently developed a similar idea (2014) emphasizing the importance of unity with respect to practical concerns, which she terms having a “person life.” Her view, however, counts as a narrative social constitution view, my own is very different from that kind of view.

¹⁷ Psychological continuity and life trajectory continuity then are symbiotic. But even if this is not sufficiently convincing, the claim that what matters in survival is the continuation of some extrinsic q-properties is not supported on the grounds of our direct intuitions anyway. It is a consequence that follows from other intuitions we do have, like the intuition that being a person matters in survival, which I claim requires a certain kind of connection to an external context. To account for this intuition, it was then conjectured, not deduced, that part of what matters in our survival is the

4.2 Continuity in a Life Trajectory's Extrinsic Properties

If the continued holding of permanent extrinsic properties are required to sustain what matters in survival, understanding what this consists in is important for understanding the life trajectory theory. One obvious way to ensure that these permanent extrinsic properties continue to delineate a subject's life trajectory is simply for that subject to remain the bearer of them. However, this rules out non-identity theories of what matters in survival, since depending on this fact would make the life trajectory theory subject to Butler's worry. Consider again the property of having authored a certain paper. How could anyone in the future be the author of that paper, asks Butler, if not identical to the earlier individual who authored that paper? No one, it seems, and if this is correct, then the life trajectory would be circular just like Locke's theory.

However, like Shoemaker and Parfit, I too will invoke the concept of something making no qualitative difference to a subject's experience, except that I will be applying this notion to extrinsic properties rather than mental states – continuity concerning quasi-extrinsic properties, rather than psychological states. This idea makes it the case that if a later subject continues an earlier subject's life trajectory, then that later subject must possess the quasi-extrinsic properties corresponding to the permanent extrinsic properties of that earlier subject.

What it means to possess the quasi-extrinsic properties of an earlier subject is expressed by the following two conditions:

The Continuity of Quasi-Extrinsic Properties

- (1) A later subject B has the q-counterpart of an early subject A's extrinsic property P just in case B can relate to their current external context in a way indistinguishable from the way in which A did prior to their cessation at moment t.
- (2) A later subject B has the q-counterpart of an early subject A's extrinsic property P just in case B relates to their external context in a way indistinguishable from the way in which A would have had A persisted after moment t.

To clarify these conditions, consider this scenario: suppose that a subject A ceases to exist at moment t, and that another psychologically continuous subject B comes into existence at that

continuation of our life trajectory, which is analyzed in terms of the continuity of certain extrinsic properties over time.

moment. Imagine that, just before moment *t*, A had the permanent extrinsic property of being the author of a certain paper, and this entailed that subject A believed and remembered authoring the paper, felt dissatisfied with it, took credit for having written it, was given such credit, gave presentations on it, and so on.

In order to satisfy condition (1), then, B would also have to (a) quasi-believe they were the author of that paper; (b) quasi-remember having authored it to the extent that A did; (c) have the same quasi-attitudes towards the paper that A had; (d) be received in the external world in the same way as A was with respect to that paper, and so on.¹⁸ To put it casually, B must occupy the same environmental niche that A did in virtue of having authored a certain paper given that there were definite ways in which A had that property. Condition (1), then, is concerned with B resembling A concerning A's permanent extrinsic properties prior to moment *t*.

Condition (2), in contrast, cannot require similarity between an earlier subject A and a later subject B, since it is concerned with A's future after moment *t*, and this never happened, but it could have. If A had existed after moment *t*, they could have changed in many different ways with respect to having authored a certain work. They might have decided to disown it, or just completely forget about it. The same is true for any of the permanent extrinsic properties A had at moment *t*. Furthermore, A's future might have included gaining various new permanent extrinsic properties, such as having children or inventing the world's best can opener. Given these facts, what must be true of a later person B to count as being A's successor?

Remaining neutral on the question of determinism entails that either there is no way to know what A's later extrinsic properties could have been, or there is no way to even determine these facts at all. What is true, however, is that A would have been the author of a certain paper no matter what they did after moment *t*. To satisfy condition (2), then, B must simply continue to

¹⁸ One might think that B would satisfy (a)-(c) simply in virtue of being A's psychological successor, but that's not essential for B to count as A's psychological successor, unless the conditions for counting as psychologically continuous are very stringent.

have the q-counterpart of A's property of having authored a certain paper, since even if A had continued after moment t, they would still have had this property. Satisfying condition (2) then can only reasonably require that B never lose the q-counterpart of A's having authored a certain paper. To satisfy condition (2), then, B must have only the quasi counterparts of the permanent extrinsic properties A would have had had A persisted, not those that A could have had.¹⁹

Having explored how a particular extrinsic property might continue over time, the question now is: how do conditions (1) and (2) apply globally? For instance, must B satisfy these conditions for all, or only most, of A's past extrinsic properties. For simplicity and accessibility, I will simply stipulate that B is, in fact, required to meet both conditions for all of A's permanent extrinsic properties. However, the theory need not be this strong. The same points could be made by replacing the notion of indistinguishability with the notion of significant discernible difference, for instance.

5. The Appeal of the Life Trajectory Theory

I argued that being a person is required for having what matters in survival. I then offered an identity neutral account – the life trajectory theory – that respects this idea. One advantage of the theory is that it is an account that a non-identity theorist can accept.²⁰ But it also has two further advantages. The first concerns a consequence of the theory for fission cases. The second concerns a consequence for different cases of virtual immersion.

5.1 Fission and the Unity Reaction

While it might appear as though a non-identity theorist should have no qualms about fission as a case in which we have what matters in survival, this is not required.²¹ In fact, there are several

¹⁹ Might this merely be ad hoc? Perhaps, but given the controversy about whether the future is open or determined, I believe it would simply be an unreasonable demand to require the condition to have the word 'could' instead of 'would'.

²⁰ See Lewis's account (1983).

²¹ Some psychological continuity theorists have embraced this consequence. Lewis (1983), for instance, agrees that we have what matters in fission cases, as do some others (Moyer, 2008; Ehring, 1995).

non-identity theorists who have expressed doubts about fission as a way of having what matters.²² And this seems reasonable. After all, it was not an intuitive position initially, not even for Parfit. Call those who believe identity does not matter, but who reject fission as a way of having what matters “Parfitian unitarians.” For these theorists, having what matters requires unity, but not necessarily identity over time – being unified over time is not the same as being identical over time.²³

To be unified over time is to remain an organized or structured complex or systematic whole. This does not require being an object that retains its identity.²⁴ For example, consider a sports team I will call “The Changelings.” Suppose that The Changelings win the championship every year, but that its individual members are different each time the team wins. Fans of The Changelings attend every game the team plays and celebrate its victory every year. However, even though The Changelings win the championship every year, there is no object The Changelings that does this winning. There is no group of winners, for instance, that we can congratulate on their long-lived success. Nevertheless, The Changelings remains a unified team for which we can cheer at every year’s final championship game. Being unified over time then is not the same as being identical over time.

A Parfitian unitarian theory would have to be one that rules out fission as a way of having what matters in survival. As it turns out, the life trajectory theory, in fact, does rule this out. It is therefore a welcome addition for the Parfitian unitarian.²⁵ The reason it does so is that the

²² See Korsgaard, 2003; Schetchman, 1996; Sosa, 1990; Rovane, 1998; Unger, 1997; Whiting, 2002; Wolf, 1986; among others. For Whiting (2002), for instance, having what matters in survival requires that we consider ourselves as a single continuous being over time, stemming from Locke’s observation that personal identity consists in the fact that a thinking being “can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places....” (L-N 2.27.9). Her theory requires accepting only unity not identity, which in fact, she rejects.

²³ See Belzer (2005) who introduces the difference between what he calls the “identity” reaction and the “unity” reaction.

²⁴ See also Perry (1972) for discussion of this distinction.

²⁵ For a non-identity theorist like myself to fully endorse psychological continuity as what matters, an intuitive position even if its current formulation is flawed, I would also need to interpret the life trajectory theory as a theory of theory of psychological continuity, which would be an externalist

requirements for the continuity of a subject's permanent extrinsic properties, as stated in conditions (1) and (2), entail that life trajectories must be unities. This is true either because the permanent extrinsic property in question happens to be one that by its nature can be logically held only by one subject at a time, or because it is an originating property of a subject's life trajectory. This is true even for having the q-counterparts of such properties.²⁶

To illustrate, reconsider psychological subject A, and their property of having authored a certain paper. Now consider A just before moment t again, except in this case, instead of ceasing at moment t, A undergoes a fission procedure that ends with the creation of two subjects B1 and B2, both psychologically continuous with, and yet distinct from A. Now, does the life trajectory theory allow for both B1 and B2 to have what matters in A's survival? Well, it does only if B1 and B2 can satisfy conditions (1) and (2) with respect to A's property of having authored a certain paper. Do they? I argue that the answer is "no."

Concerning condition (1), consider how A had the property of being the author of a certain paper – in the form of having been the sole author of that paper, and that A related to the world in the way that being the sole author of a paper dictates. Now consider whether B1 and B2 could have the q-counterpart of this property. It is at least true that they could both have the same q-psychological states with respect to that property, but they could not both act that way nor could they be received that way simply due to the nature of the property of being a sole author. B1 and B2, then, could not occupy A's previous environmental niche of having been a sole author.

It might be argued that even if B1 and B2 cannot have the q-counterpart of having been a sole author, they can have something similar – that of having co-authored the paper in question.

account of that concept. Although I do not provide such details here, I do believe that such an interpretation is possible.

²⁶ One potential objection to this criterion is that it begs the question. The issue can be understood in the following way: in assuming that there are permanent extrinsic properties that only one being can have at a time, haven't I guaranteed that fission cannot preserve what matters in survival? Well, yes, but the argument I have offered for the life trajectory theory did not begin with the premise that properties that only one being at time can have matter in survival. This followed from other assumptions for which there is independent motivation.

But having the property of being a co-author has a distinct character from being a sole author. It is therefore a different property than being a sole author. And these facts about the different characters of the relevant properties are metaphysical facts about their nature, not merely practical matters. So even if we granted the property of co-authorship to B1 and B2, they still could not satisfy condition (1) for being A's successor.

Condition (2) would require that both B1 and B2 cannot lack or lose those permanent extrinsic properties that A would have had after moment t. As just illustrated, however, one of the properties that A would have had after moment t is being the sole author of a certain paper. Now for B1 and B2 to have this property, they must both be able to be said to currently have the q-counterpart of that property. But being the sole author of a certain paper is not a property that two beings can have at once, simply as a conceptual matter. Of course, both B1 and B2 can claim to be psychologically continuous with something that once had that property of A's, and this is not something that just anyone can claim, nevertheless, having once had A's extrinsic property of being a sole author no more counts as having that property's q-counterpart than would merely having once had A's memories. Neither fission product, then, can maintain what is required for what matters in survival on the life trajectory theory.²⁷ Parfitian unitarianism, therefore, itself attractive, can be adopted by the life trajectory theorist, one reason to find the theory appealing.

5.2 Virtual Immersion Scenarios

The second positive consequence of the life trajectory theory is that it can explain and predict a range of intuitions about virtual immersion cases. To illustrate, I reconsider the experience machine and a variant of that case.

²⁷ Even if condition (1) is relaxed in certain ways so that a successor of A need not be completely indistinguishable with respect to certain permanent extrinsic properties of A's, nevertheless, because they are extrinsic properties, certain environmental conditions would still be required to hold that would rule out the possibility of two beings having the q-counterpart of a property like being a sole author. And, even supposing the global condition of satisfying condition (1) is relaxed, it is relatively unlikely that all of the permanent extrinsic properties a psychological subject has that entail unity over time could be ruled out, at least not without begging the question.

In the experience machine case, I claimed that most would react with horror and anxiety to the possibility of being immersed in a world in which their experiences were entirely de-correlated with facts about their external context. The explanation for this horror was that, in such a scenario, we lose what matters for our survival due to the loss of our personhood.

Now consider a different scenario. Imagine the anticipation we might feel if all psychological subjects could rid themselves together, en masse, of the shackles of their decaying bodies by immersing their psychologies within a shared, interactive virtual world, maintained independently of their bodies. Suppose that, somehow, our aging, dying biological bodies become obsolete. Surely, a respectable number of us would look at a scenario as a way of achieving immortality.²⁸

As I argued earlier, standard psychological continuity theory predicts that we do have what matters in cases of virtual immersion, and therefore it can predict our reaction of anticipation to the second case. However, it cannot predict our reaction of horror to the experience machine case. In contrast, it appears that the life trajectory theory can predict our reaction of horror, but it cannot predict our reaction of anticipation. Therefore, standard psychological continuity theory gets it wrong for the first virtual immersion case, but right for the second one. And the life trajectory theorist gets it right for the first case, but wrong for the second one. So, neither is to be preferred over the other, at least on these grounds.

However, the life trajectory theory is more versatile than it might at first seem. It turns out that it can in fact predict the correct reaction to the second virtual immersion case. To see this, requires re-conceptualizing what it means to exist in an external context, however. Our natural assumption is that these kinds of contexts must be identified with spatial temporal contexts. But this assumption might be rejected if technology advances to the point of allowing for purely virtual

²⁸ For details about ways these possibilities might be realized and their potential implications, see Chalmers (2010). Sauchelli (2017) addresses how such “life extending” techniques may or may not fit with certain narrative conceptions of what matters over time.

interactions that incorporate all of the ways we can do so in the spatial temporal realm. In this case, a purely virtual environment could count as mind-independent – as external – supposing shared experiences of that virtual environment and that it is itself governed by predictable, systematic laws. If a virtual environment can be so construed, then persons could still have extrinsic properties that could persist over time or cease to do so. The life trajectory theorist could then say that what matters in survival can be maintained in such contexts.

6. Objections

There are lines of objections to the view I have presented two of which concern whether the being in the machine or even fission-products lose their personhood on the life trajectory view. First, beings in the machine could very well be self-determining, and therefore have a life trajectory. Second, whether a person survives fission, depends on the details, and there are other fission scenarios that appears as though people survive, another challenge to the life trajectory view. Third, even if they fail to do so, there are two alternative explanations: (a) persons are not the kind of beings for; or (b) being a person does not really matter in survival.

6.1 The Experience Machine and Self-determination

Another way to address the experience machine scenario is to argue that the subject in the experience machine retains a self-determined life. That subject chooses to enter the machine, and every experience they have afterwards, is the result of their original choice. Therefore, they are in fact living the lives they want to live. But is simply making one self-determining choice enough to have a self-determined life, and therefore be a person? I argue that the answer is “no.”²⁹

Part of having a self-determined life is to play an active role in shaping one’s life, and prior decisions, even if they come to fruition, does not entail that a person retains a self-determined life. Consider, for instance, the fact that a parent wishes their children to be well off upon their

²⁹ See Wilson (2005) for arguments that agency should not be included in an account of personhood.

death, and they plan things so that this is true after their death. Now of course simply because the parent's choice is realized, clearly this is not part of their self-determined life since their life has ended. Or consider someone who decides to drink too much alcohol and kills a child in a car accident. Society holds this person responsible for the after-effects of their decision to drink, and they are given a life sentence for that decision due to its results. This person is then imprisoned and their free will severely constrained. Their ability to be self-determining is almost non-existent. Examples like these illustrate that the mere realization of a person's initial self-determining actions does not entail having a self-determined life. This line of argument from the psychological continuity theorist, then, also does not appear promising.

6.2 Other Fission Scenarios

There are other ways fission might be realized that could be argued are consistent with the life trajectory theory, which would rule out its adoption by the Parfitian unitarian, what I claimed as an advantage of the theory. I consider one such way and suggest that it is not clearly a case of fission, and therefore it does not threaten my claim that the life trajectory theory rules out fission as a way of having what matters.

One non-standard fission scenario is explored by Martin (1995), which he calls "fission rejuvenation." In this scenario, we suppose that when we are, say, 30 years old, a scientist offers us the opportunity to undergo fission, except that one fission product is kept unconscious, and we then continue our life as before. The unconscious fission product remains physically preserved until our death, at which point that being, whose psychological states have been continuously updated to track the now deceased fission product's psychological states, is awakened and picks up where we left off. We can imagine this continuing indefinitely. Martin claims that this is a case of fission, and if that is correct, it appears to be one that meets the requirements of the life trajectory theory for having what matters in survival. However, the claim that this is a true case of

fission is questionable.³⁰ It is not clear, for instance, whether this case is not better described as a case of sophisticated body cloning that includes a mental state transfer process. The claim that fission rejuvenation counts as a true case of fission, then, needs more careful consideration before we could draw any strong conclusions about the life trajectory theory.³¹

6.3 Persons as Essentially Psychological Entities

The third objection the psychological continuity theorist might offer is simply to deny that being a person requires having free will – a self-determined life. I will offer reasons to believe that this is false.

For the psychological theorist, it is persistence of internal psychological states that matter in a person's having what matters in survival. One central idea is that persons have the property of being self-aware – a kind of higher-order conscious state.³² As Baker might (2013) would put it, they must have a “first-person perspective.” However, it is not clear whether this property distinguishes persons from other types of psychological beings that are not persons. For instance, it surely seems that when it is time to clip the nails of my dogs, they show self-awareness, and a first-experiencer perspective. They know it is their nails that are to be clipped and that they find it unpleasant, which they illustrate by running away as soon as they see the clippers coming out of the drawer.³³ Now of course they do not think to themselves that I, one of the dogs that lives here, is going to have my nails clipped. Self-awareness or having a self-oriented perspective, then, does not appear to be sufficient for personhood.

³⁰ Suppose that we have an entire world that fissions. Would each fission product then count as having what matters? The answer I think would depend upon whether the q-counterparts of extrinsic properties are themselves individuated internally or externally mirroring the debate about whether water or even mental states must be so individuated. Thanks to Eric Schwitzgebel for bringing this possibility to my attention.

³¹ See Martin (1995) for reasons for thinking it truly is a case of fission.

³² In fact, it is not clear that conscious states do not presuppose self-awareness.

³³ According to Lycan (2001), this would entail that dogs have higher-order states of consciousness, but I am not sure this would be a happy result for what are known as “HOT” theorists, if offering an “HOT” theory as a way of distinguishing persons from other types of cognitive beings. Rosenthal's (1986) theory has much the same problem.

Another idea is that persons, unlike dogs, have more complex states of higher-order consciousness than simple self-awareness. That is, they have conscious states about their conscious states. For instance, a person can have anxiety about having anxiety about getting to sleep, which prevents them from sleeping, and dogs do not seem to have this problem. Having states of higher-order consciousness like these then do, at least, separate certain types of cognitive beings as failing to be persons, such as dogs, for instance.

Nevertheless, the previous idea is still too broad. Consider the Borg from Star Trek. These creatures, we see as beings controlled by a central intelligence that itself may have higher order thoughts, and yet there is no entity with the property of being a person. In fact, the Borg does not even satisfy the minimum criteria for having what matters in survival over time. There is no later subject B that believes its experiences are those that satisfy the desires of previous subject A's desires. Having states of higher-order consciousness, then, may again be a necessary condition on being a person, but it does not suffice for it.³⁴

6.4 Why Being a Person Matters in Survival

Another tack the psychological continuity theorist could take is to simply deny that personhood matters in survival. One immediate rebuttal is that this objection cannot even get off the ground simply for conceptual reasons – that in giving a theory of what matters in survival of persons, our object of study is...well...persons. Consider the alternative. Imagine, for instance, a person now knows they will soon inherit millions of dollars, but they also know that before this happens, they will be turned into a bunny. The subject who later inherits the money – the bunny – is not going to experience that event as if it constitutes the satisfaction of the previous subject's desire, assuming bunnies are even sufficiently advanced enough to be cognizant of having inherited anything at all. Neither will the person who now exists anticipate that the bunny's inheriting of the

³⁴ Carruthers's dispositionalist account (1996) improves upon these ideas since the states must be about oneself, but in terms of being used to address a theory of what matters, it would either beg the question, or count The Borg as a single person.

money will constitute the satisfaction of their current desires. Simply by definition, then, being a person must matter in survival.

A second rebuttal is to show that given a choice between fully remaining a person or completely sustaining all psychological states that people would choose the former over the latter. Recall that in the single-case transplant most agree that their mind matters more for what matters in survival than their bodies. This then serves as evidence for Parfit's claim that what matters in survival is psychological continuity. Supposing this is a good argument strategy, I will now appeal to the very same method, except that the choice is not between body and mind, but instead between being a subject that sustains their complete psychology but lacks the property of being a person or accepting only partial psychological continuity but fully retaining the property of being a person. I offer a thought experiment in favor of the latter idea.

Imagine that you are ill with a fatal degenerative brain disease, but that neuropsychologists and computer scientists know how to convert sets of psychological states into a digital format. Your doctor offers you the option of having your entire psychology, which has the digital informational value of approximately 2.5 petabytes, or 2500 terabytes transferred to a digital storage device.

You are warned, however, that scientists cannot convert psychological states back into any format readable by an organic brain, and that it is possible to store 2500 terabytes of data on a portable digital storage unit only if it is kept at a ridiculously low temperature. Otherwise, your psychology must be stored on a device that is not feasibly portable. If you choose to have your entire psychology converted, then, there will be no way for you to live as the embodied person you once were. You will, however, still be able to communicate with the outside world via projecting your thoughts onto a digital screen.

You are also told, however, that there is another option. Your psychology can be compressed and stored on a digital storage unit that will fit within a body cloned from yours, but that this compression will inevitably result in the loss of the finer details of your psychological

states. For example, you may lose some of your memories or current desires, but none that shaped your current character. This process would, therefore, allow you to keep the defining properties of your psychology in a way similar to the way in which a JPEG file of a tiger, which was originally a RAW file, still looks like a tiger, even though it fails to contain every tiger-y pixel it had originally.

In the first scenario, though your psychology continues in its entirety, you lose a significant degree of autonomy and control over your life. You could no longer have the life you had once wanted. You would lose properties that I claim constitute being a person. In the second scenario, your autonomy and control, among other properties that make up being a person are fully preserved. That is, after the compression transfer process, you could still do everything you had planned to do prior to the onset of the disease, at least those that you deemed important.

Now which choice is preferable? I suspect the second option is the most attractive – that our psychologies matter, but only as far as they allow us to continue to be the self-determining beings we had always been. Notice that Parfit uses this very style of argument to show that what matters is psychological continuity. I conclude then that being a person does matter in survival, and that therefore rejecting it as part of an account of what matters is not feasible.

A fourth response that the psychological continuity theorist could make is that being person is not a property that matters in survival. Instead, it is a property that matters only in a life of value. Theories of what matter in survival are not concerned with metaphysics, but instead with practical issues and issues of value. Appealing to this distinction, however, threatens to undermine the entire project of offering any theory of persons whatsoever – at least one with any grounding in metaphysical concerns.³⁵ Relying on this distinction could have the consequence of making what matters in survival entirely perspectival or person relative. For example, the very

³⁵ This is where Schetchman (2014) would have strong disagreements. Whereas she argues that practical concerns are metaphysical concerns, and I agree in certain regards. I am committed to the idea that at least being a member of a metaphysical kind is still importantly different from being a member of let us say, only a normative kind, or only a prudential kind.

same thing would be at stake for a person who so highly values their lucky left big toe that they believe losing it would kill them, and a person who requires that medical professionals refrain from resuscitating them if they can no longer be self-sufficient – what matters in their survival. This seems wrong. A particular constraint that rules out this consequence, then, is needed. What that constraint could be if an appeal to the metaphysical kind person is not available, however, is not clear.

Even Parfit, for instance, in considering what constitutes personal identity over time, begins with a metaphysical stance on the nature of a person as a kind – as a psychological – physical entity. In fact, appealing to this claim is needed to make the single-transplant argument for psychological continuity valid altogether, given that its structure depends upon the choice between physical or psychological continuity as an exhaustive dichotomy.

So, rejecting personhood as part of what matters in survival also does not appear to be a viable position for the standard psychological continuity theorist to take. Internalism about what matters in survival is not therefore easily defended.

7. Concluding Remarks

I offered a theory, in lieu of standard psychological theory since I believe it captures more of what counts as a person that that theory does. I also argued that the theory fares better with respect to our intuitions about certain cases, such as fission and different kinds of virtual immersion scenarios.³⁶ Since standard psychological continuity theory cannot accommodate as many of our intuitions as the life trajectory theory can, we ought to reject the standard theory in favor of the life trajectory theory.³⁷

³⁶ The position explored shares similarities with other view but is still distinct. In particular, the externalist aspect of the life trajectory hypothesis is not new, and neither is the Parfitian view of identity. However, the emphasis on the importance of personhood for having what matters, and their specific way in which externalism and Parfitian views about identity are combined is novel. For comparison, Whiting's (2002) work supports Parfitian singularism, but is driven by internalist considerations. In contrast, Lindemann's (2014) work on personal identity is externalist, but hers is one focused on social relations, rather than all external relations.

³⁷ Thanks to John G. Bennett, Peter Carruthers, Ted Everett, Dan Giberman, John Horty, Peter

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