

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF PERSONHOOD

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Abstract

The debate on personal identity tends to conflate or ignore two different usages of the word 'person'. Psychological-continuity proponents concentrate upon its use to refer to human psychology or personality, while animalist critics prefer its use to refer to individual human beings. I argue that this duality undermines any attempt to see 'person' as a genuine sortal term. Instead, adopting suggestions found in Dennett and Sellars, I consider personhood as an ascription rather like an honorific title or achievement-marker. I show how the questions of identity for a regular honorific title like 'genius' inevitably supervene on identity-questions concerning the more basic entity of 'person'. I then argue by analogy that, if 'person' be regarded as an honorific on a par with 'genius', questions of personal identity over time necessarily collapse into questions of the continuing identity of human beings. Attempts to separate the continuity of a person from that of the human being who embodies it then founder on conceptual and referential incoherencies. Room is left for increasing the extension of personhood ascriptions to non-humans in the future, while much that was previously puzzling about its behaviour as a concept is explained. At least some of the revisionist debate can now be seen more profitably as a debate about the moral and pragmatic considerations underlying non-paradigm human continuity.

The recent debate on personal identity has been dominated by the belief that 'person' can be defined solely in terms of relations of continuity and/or connectedness between psychological states and events across time. In reaction to this, some philosophers have attempted to show that the concept of person picks out human beings or at least particularly good specimens of human beings, the animalist thesis. It seems to me that both are misguided, although animalism is considerably less so. Where both err is in their belief that 'person' is a genuine sortal-term. 'Person' does not act like this at all, and a recognition of this may help us to sort out what has been worthwhile in these debates to date. In the first section of this paper I review our usage of the

word 'person' and the way that the debate about personal identity has developed. Next I examine another non-sortal concept, that of genius, and outline the symmetries between its usage and that of 'person'. Finally, I sum up the advantages of treating 'person' in this way.

I

Any examination of our use of the word 'person' soon uncovers the intrinsic duality which underlies philosophical debate. Jenny Teichman's brief foray through the *Oxford English Dictionary*¹ collected a variety of everyday, philosophical, biological and legal usages. While some of these clearly derived from or were parasitic upon the concept of 'human being', others seemed purely psychological, and thus reflected 'person's' descent from the Latin *persona*, mask or character. As Teichman makes clear, the *O.E.D.*'s definitions serve to capture at least two different notions which English-users have sought to express with the single word 'person'. On the one hand, there is the ordinary everyday human being, a living, physical organism. And then there is the more limited concept of the human mind or personality.

What makes this second usage particularly problematic is that its application has not been confined to human beings. From ancient times there has been a strong anthropomorphic strain in human culture which has made person-like ascriptions to gods and spirits, to other kinds of animal, to trees and natural features like rivers. Science has raised the possibility of further candidates for personhood: computers and robots, clones and androids, aliens, and perhaps even members of other terrestrial species, such as chimpanzees or dolphins. Whatever this usage of 'person' seeks to capture, then, it is not something that is necessarily exclusive to human beings.

At the same time, philosophical debate has queried whether all human beings are persons, or all human entities fully-fledged human beings. The exact status of foetuses, infants, the brain-damaged or vegetative, remains a matter for debate. These are all members of or continuous with the set of functioning adult human beings who would seem to be paradigm bearers of the ascription of personhood, but whether they *are* persons (or whether their treatment or status ought to depend on whether

¹ Recorded in Teichman, 'The Definition of *Person*', *Philosophy* LX (1985), pp. 175–185.

they are persons) is still not settled. There is even the possibility of a single human being more than one person at the same time, a claim made on behalf of sufferers from 'Multiple Personality Disorder'.²

The philosophical debate has concentrated upon exploring the notion of 'person' according to this second usage, starting with Descartes' conclusion that he was essentially a thinking thing, non-essentially an embodied thing, and therefore potentially capable of continuing to exist after the destruction of his body. This underlies much of Locke's (entirely non-physical) definition of a person:

a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it.³

But Locke rejects the substantial underpinning of Descartes' soul/mind, demanding that:

therefore those, who place thinking in an immaterial Substance only . . . must shew why personal Identity cannot be preserved in the change of immaterial Substances, or variety of particular immaterial Substances, as well as animal Identity is preserved in the change of material Substances, or variety of particular Bodies.⁴

We have here at least the beginnings of the psychological criterion of personal identity. This received a radically different formulation from Derek Parfit who argued that

*Personal identity is not what matters. I claim: What matters is Relation R: psychological connectedness and/or continuity with the right kind of cause. Since it is more controversial, I add, as a separate claim: The right kind of cause could be any cause.*⁵

This liberated explications of psychological continuity from the logical constraints imposed by the concept of identity, and

² See Kathleen Wilkes, *Real People* (Oxford: University Press, 1988) Chapter 4 for a discussion of this.

³ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [1690] ed. by Peter Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), Book II Chapter XXVII Section 9 (p. 335 in Niddich edition).

⁴ Locke, *Essay*, Section 12 (p. 337 in Niddich edition).

⁵ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 215.

allowed Parfit to explore the moral and pragmatic characteristics of psychological survival, a weaker but (for Parfit, at any rate) more liberating concept.

The quarter of a century since Parfit's ground-breaking first paper⁶ has seen a plethora of amendments, modifications and applications of the psychological criterion for identity and/or survival in different forms. Persons have been reduced to collections of temporal slices of psychology.⁷ It has been argued that each human body may contain or in some sense sustain a multiplicity of purely psychological persons – the Multiple Occupancy Thesis.⁸ It has even been suggested that my continuing identity as a person may depend upon nothing that I am or do, but is determined by extrinsic facts concerning possible 'rivals' for my identity who may not even be on the same planet as me – the Closest Continuer Thesis.⁹ In short, there is no hypothetical indignity to which persons have not been put by philosophers entranced by one or another aspect of the notion of persons as purely psychological entities.

There have been attempts to force the debate to recognise the necessary human component of personhood, attacking any reliance upon the Cartesian first-person perspective. Strawson argued that we can only ever understand the ascription of mental characteristics as part of a necessarily joint set of mental *and* physical instantiated properties.¹⁰ And Bernard Williams showed that the thought-experiments beloved of psychological-criterion proponents could be used to generate contradictory intuitions concerning our own continuity, depending upon the structure of such narratives and whether they were presented in a first-person or third-person mode.¹¹ These considerations led Williams in the direction of believing that bodily continuity was at least a necessary if not sufficient condition for personal identity. David Wiggins argued for what he terms the 'animal attribute view' of personhood:

⁶ Derek Parfit, 'Personal Identity', *Philosophical Review* LXXX (1971), pp. 3–27.

⁷ By David Lewis, amongst others. See his 'Survival and Identity', in *Philosophical Papers* Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

⁸ See Denis Robinson's 'Can Amoebae Divide Without Multiplying?', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* LXIII (1985), pp. 299–319.

⁹ First formulated by Robert Nozick in Chapter 1 of his *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

¹⁰ Peter Strawson, *Individuals* (London: Methuen, 1959).

¹¹ See especially Williams' 'The Self and the Future', reprinted in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), pp. 46–63.

This sees *person* as a concept whose defining marks are to be given in terms of a natural kind determinable, say *animal*, plus what might be called a functional or . . . systemic component . . . On this account *person* is a non-biological qualification of *animal*, and potentially at least, a cross-classification with respect to zoological classification across the grain, so to speak, of the evolution-based taxonomy.¹²

And this has led to the contemporary view that we now term animalism, the proposal concisely expressed by Paul Snowdon as 'We are identical with, are one and the same thing as, certain (human) animals.'¹³ and defended in one form or another by such philosophers as Ayers, Olson and Wollheim.¹⁴

Animalism acknowledges the primacy of our first usage of 'person', its application to human beings as biological organisms. But it must surely be more than the thesis that the known extension of the sortal 'person' is identical to that of the sortal 'human being', since there remains the possibility of there being persons who were not *homo sapiens*. Accepting such possibilities commits us to saying by virtue of what facts we ought to consider whether or not to apply the term 'person' to any such candidate. And thus it seems to commit us to some feature of human persons which possible non-human persons might share. Given this tendency to make ascriptions to non-humans, it might perhaps be more fruitful to enquire whether 'person' is really a genuine sortal at all.

Clearly, 'person' is not a natural kind sortal; though it is obviously related to the natural kind of human beings, 'person' is not exactly co-extensive with 'human being'. And there seems to be no more extensive scientific category, no biological genus or classification, to which 'person' can be more accurately applied. Might it then be a phased sortal? This is a suggestion that might be acceptable to believers in an animalist analysis of personhood. If personhood is to be attached to membership of the human species, while accepting that infants and foetuses, the senile and vegetative, or the dead are not necessarily persons by virtue of their biological humanness, then something like this seems plausible. Personhood

¹² David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 171.

¹³ Paul F. Snowdon, 'Persons, Animals and Bodies', in *The Body & The Self*, edited by J.L. Bermudez, A. Marcel & N. Eilan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p. 71.

¹⁴ See Michael Ayers, *Locke* Vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1991), especially Chapter 25, Eric T. Olson, 'Human People or Human Animals?', *Philosophical Studies* LXXX (1995) pp. 159–181, and Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), Chapter 1.

would then be cashed out in terms of membership of the set of paradigm functioning adult human beings. We grow into personhood and then, eventually, grow out of it. The attractiveness of this might seem to be vitiated by the difficulty in deciding exactly when we become or cease to become persons. But much of the sting could be taken out of this by the suggestion that 'person' is also a partial or scalar concept.¹⁵ This would allow us to make sense of the claim that, though neither a fourteen-year-old child nor a nine-month-old infant were persons, the teenager was more nearly a person than the baby. And it would give us some conceptual leeway for making decisions at the other end of life, with Alzheimer victims for instance.

The idea of 'person' as a scalar phased sortal has, then, many attractions. But again it cannot be regarded as totally successful while there remains the possibility of making personhood-ascriptions to non-human candidates. We would have to try to determine exactly what qualities or abilities over and above mere age or degree of biological development could justify such ascriptions, what qualities paradigm human candidates possess that might also underwrite a rational desire to attribute personhood to a non-human.

Daniel Dennett outlined such a set of properties in 'Conditions of Personhood',¹⁶ listing them as rationality, intentionality, recipience of an intentional stance, ability to adopt an intentional stance towards others, language-use, and self-consciousness. This captures much that is important about paradigm human beings, but there is nothing specifically human about any of these qualities or abilities; it is conceivable that some or all of them could be manifested by a non-human candidate for personhood. Yet the set has a slightly arbitrary air about it, and it may be neither sufficient nor necessary as it stands. Wilkes, for instance, has queried why it doesn't include tool-use.¹⁷ And we might wonder whether self-consciousness is necessary; we assume it rather than require it of those of our fellow humans who fulfil all the other requirements.

Dennett's presentation obscures an important distinction. Rationality, intentionality, linguistic ability and consciousness have a broadly intrinsic nature. But willingness to adopt an intentional

¹⁵ A suggestion that seems to appeal to, for example, Bernard Williams. See his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), pp. 114ff.

¹⁶ Reprinted in his *Brainstorms* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981).

¹⁷ Wilkes, *Real People*, p. 23.

stance towards others and being the kind of thing that attracts intentional stances from others are relational properties with a necessarily social dimension. A candidate possesses these properties on the basis of possessing and/or manifesting some or all or a sufficient quantity of Dennett's other properties, which it does by partaking in a form of life. This leads me to re-consider a remark which Dennett made earlier in his paper:

It might turn out, for instance, that the concept of a person is only a free-floating honorific that we are all happy to apply to ourselves, and to others as the spirit moves us, guided by our emotions, aesthetic sensibilities, considerations of policy and the like.¹⁸

Dennett insists that the importance the concept of a person has for philosophers is surely some indication that it is more than this; hence his search for necessary and sufficient conditions. But the notion of 'person' operating more as a title than as a genuine sortal is worth further investigation, for it may be the case that it has certain application-principles, is less free-floating than Dennett fears.

Approaching the topic from the direction of a consideration of personhood as a moral status or condition of some sort, Wilfrid Sellars writes:

To think of a featherless biped as a person is to think of it as a being with which one is bound up in a network of rights and duties . . . to construe its behaviour in terms of actual or potential membership in an embracing group each member of which thinks of itself as a member of the group . . . The most embracing community to which he belongs consists of those with whom he can enter into meaningful discourse . . . Thus to recognize a featherless biped or dolphin or Martian as a person is to think of oneself and it as belonging to a community.¹⁹

Where Dennett does not make clear whether the moral notion of the person in some sense supervenes upon the joint satisfaction of his six conditions, or whether it perhaps is more intimately

¹⁸ Dennett, *Brainstorms*, p. 268.

¹⁹ Wilfrid Sellars, 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man', in *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 39.

connected with, say, the conditions of reciprocity and reception of an intentional stance, Sellars regards the moral notion more centrally. To regard a candidate entity as a person is to regard it as a participant in the 'network of rights and duties' on a par with oneself. Dennettian notions of rationality, linguistic ability, etc. could support or justify the admission of a candidate into our community but are not themselves strictly definitional in the matter. One way of viewing this use of 'person' is indeed to see it as a kind of honorific. Perhaps it might more accurately be regarded as a status- or achievement-term, a kind of confirmation of membership. With this thought in mind, I wonder if much of the debate about the identity of persons can be mirrored in discussions of achievement-terms.

II

Take, for instance, the achievement-term 'genius'. If we say that Professor X is a genius we mean something like: X manifests possession of an extremely high level of intellectual development and creativity. What the exact qualifications for being a genius are is unimportant; it is sufficient for our purposes that there *be* some such conditions. They need not be so rigid as to define the class of geniuses exactly, provided only that we know what conditions a paradigm specimen of genius would have to satisfy. Suppose that I wish to ask if X, the genius now present, is the *same* genius as the one who was present last week. This seems to presuppose that there are identity-conditions for geniuses. But this is plainly not the case for my query can only be answered by establishing whether or not X satisfies the identity-conditions for whatever entity it is that bears the ascription of genius. The answer to my question concerning genius-identity is wholly dependent upon and decided by the answer to the question of whether or not Professor X is the same *person* as the person present last week, for it is to persons that we ascribe genius; a genius has *no* diachronic identity-conditions of its own.

Geniushood shares another feature with personhood, for it too can be used to generate puzzle-cases. However, the way that we would ordinarily seek to reconcile such puzzles gives us a strong indication of the way that we ought, were we not befuddled by the complexities of psychological continuity accounts, to tackle similar puzzle-cases concerning personhood. Suppose that Professor X was present both last week and today. Last week X

manifested his genius by his remarkable musical creativity; perhaps he sat down at a piano and threw off a handful of exquisite variations. Today he shows no interest in music and cannot play even the simplest piece, but through his conversation X demonstrates a profound grasp of mathematics; perhaps he dashes off a new and more elegant proof of Fermat's Last Theorem. This surely is proof of X's genius, so X then was a genius and X now is a genius. But do we wish to say here that X is the *same* genius today as he was last week?

The case is, as it stands, hopelessly under-described (though no more so than many other thought-experiments concerning personal identity); we should surely demand some explanation for the dramatic change in X. Nevertheless, we are not necessarily at a loss, for we often use the word 'genius' not only to designate persons of extraordinary capabilities but also those capabilities themselves. For instance, last week we might have said 'Professor X has a genius for musical composition' and this week 'he has a genius for mathematics'. In this sense of the word X *has* a different genius now from the one he had then. But this does not entail that he *is* a different genius. Our question might better be phrased 'Is that which was genius-like last week the same as that which is genius-like today?' where the two uses of 'that' refer to persons. In this sense Professor X may be numerically identical with the genius in my room last week although qualitatively different. Similarly, 'person' may be applied to that entity which satisfies personhood-conditions (in paradigm cases, a human being) or more loosely to the set of properties, the psychology or personality, which in some sense defines or makes obvious of something that it is a person. It does not follow that 'person' in the second sense has any kind of ontological independence, any more than a genius for musical composition could exist independently of someone or something being or having such a genius.

Suppose that last week Professor Y had been present, demonstrating his prodigious mathematical skills while X was playing the piano. Now Y turns up again, but today shows neither interest in nor skill with numbers; instead he performs the kind of compositional feats of which X was capable last week. We should, I think, want to say that Y *has* the kind of genius that X had last week, and vice versa. But this does not mean that we must therefore say that Y *is* the same genius that X was last week. For inasmuch as the qualities which enable us to refer to either X or Y as geniuses are supervenient upon their existence as persons, the

conditions for diachronic identity of genius must follow from those for the diachronic identity of persons. If, instead, we seek to claim that X and Y have in any sense other than the metaphorical *swapped* geniuses then we are granting whatever is the reference of the word 'genius' here an ontological status separate from the ontological status of X and Y as persons or as human beings. And 'genius' is here being cashed out in terms of capacities and behaviour, neither of which can have an ontological status separate from 'that which possesses these capacities' or 'that which manifests that behaviour'.

Whether or not Professor X is the same *person* as last week ought then to be reducible in the same fashion to the question of whether or not he was the same *human being*. For if 'person' denotes a status like 'genius' then we cannot grant it separate identity-conditions. Whatever has separate identity-conditions has a separate ontological status, and personhood cannot exist without that which is a person any more than geniushood could exist without that which is a genius. Whatever ontological status persons have is entirely parasitic upon the ontological status of human beings. To demonstrate the plausibility of this, let us return to the two professors.

Professor X no longer appears musical but demonstrates the kind of mathematical skills that Y had done previously, and vice versa. Now suppose further that X shows none of the signs typical of X's behaviour; he has none of X's traits and habits, seems to remember none of X's memories or intentions, and so forth. Instead, he exhibits the behaviour previously associated with Professor Y; and the same seems to hold in reverse for Y himself. How should I describe this bizarre situation? One possibility is that X and Y are the same persons that they were last week (and the same human beings) but that each of them has undergone a radical and (to me) inexplicable psychological transformation. Alternatively, I can say that X and Y are the same human beings but different persons; human-x now embodies Y while human-y embodies X. There has been, we might say, a person-swap or a mind-swap of some sort.

A possible cause is a brain-transfer operation (of the type hypothesised by Wiggins²⁰ and Shoemaker²¹); perhaps Professor

²⁰ David Wiggins, *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967).

²¹ Sydney Shoemaker, *Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

X's brain has been surgically transplanted into Y's body and vice versa. This raises certain difficulties, for it no longer seems appropriate to say that X and Y are the same human beings that they were; the paradigmatic continuity conditions for human beings do not extend to the exchange of major parts of the organism like brains, an operation which seems to treat both X and Y as artifacts, as collections of interchangeable components. And if we can no longer make any indisputable identity-judgements concerning human beings, physical objects that ought to be referentially more basic since they ordinarily have clear and determinate identity-conditions, then we should not feel constrained to make any judgements concerning the identity of persons or geniuses here. The situation is so different from those in which our words and concepts normally operate that to feel otherwise is, as Quine has said, 'to suggest that words have some logical force beyond what our past needs have invested them with.'²² Perhaps all we can say is that there are two new entities present which act in many ways like the entities present last week.

Suppose, then, that the explanation for the changes in their behaviour is instead to be found in the fact that X and Y have undergone a mind-swap operation of some sort. X's mind is now embodied in or manifested by Y's body and vice versa. A minimum condition for our agreeing that a mind-swap operation has taken place would seem to be that something has been *swapped* between the two professors. And to say that some *thing* has been swapped would seem to imply that an entity with a degree of ontological independence of some kind has been switched for a similar entity.²³ This seems hopelessly vague as it stands and it is precisely our problem here to make it less vague.

Can we explain the situation by hypothesising that the two professors have in some way exchanged non-physical substances, and that their psychological properties supervene upon or are

²² W. V. O. Quine, 'Review of Munitz's *Identity and Individuation*', *Journal of Philosophy* LXIX (1972), p. 490.

²³ The alternative is to say that X's mind has been made *like* Y's, and vice versa, which would leave it open to us to say that X is the same person and the same genius as last week but that all of his psychological qualities have been changed. This is not the same as X *becoming* Y, for X could have been made like Y in this fashion while Y remained unaltered: clearly X could then not *be* Y or be identical with Y as Y would still be in existence. The counter-intuitive nature of X's continuing identity depending entirely on the extrinsic state of affairs of Y's continuing changed or unchanged nature remains the strongest challenge to Robert Nozick's 'closest continuer' theory of personal identity. See Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

caused by these incorporeal substances? Such an explanation would be singularly out of kilter with the materialist leaning of modern philosophy and, at the risk of being thought excessively verificationist, it is hard to see how we could directly establish the existence of such substances. It can, of course, be argued that we can infer the presence of the incorporeal from some other set of facts, and such a position has been adopted by Richard Swinburne.²⁴ But there remain for Swinburne, as there did for Descartes, problems of identification and interaction which for those of us of a more materialist bent tend to vitiate any attractiveness such an analysis might have. Since such an explanation would remain unconfirmable in principle even to Professors X and Y themselves, there being no wherewithal in the Cartesian analysis of mind for establishing whether my present thinking substance might be identical with some past or future thinking substance, we ought perhaps to avoid a Cartesian explanation here unless there is no alternative.

If X and Y have not swapped any physical stuff and have not swapped any non-physical stuff, then what *have* they swapped? Might it not be that they have, so to speak, swapped information states?²⁵ This would be to say that Professor X's personhood supervenes in some fashion upon the information-state which last week was physically encoded in the brain of human-x. This is now encoded in the brain of human-y while human-x's brain now encodes the information state upon which depends Y's personhood. There are only a limited number of ways in which such a state of affairs could be brought about. Firstly, we can extract from X whatever physical structure it is that is causally responsible for his being in an X-information-state, and exchange this with a similar item from Y. But this amounts to a brain-transfer, or at the very least to a transfer of substantial portions of the brain, which we have already dealt with. Secondly, we can alter the structure of X's neurology so that an information-state indistinguishable from that presently supervenient upon Y's brain now supervenes upon X's brain, and vice versa. Thirdly, we can remove the requisite physical structure of X's neurology and

²⁴ See Richard Swinburne, 'Personal Identity', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* LXXIV (1973-4), pp. 231-47, and, in a more rigorous version, 'Personal Identity: The Dualist Theory', in Shoemaker & Swinburne, *Personal Identity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

²⁵ Peter Unger raises this possibility in *Identity, Consciousness and Value* (Oxford: University Press 1990).

insert a new one, whether artificial or organic, which has such a physical nature that an information-state indistinguishable from that presently supervenient upon Y's brain now supervenes upon X, and *mutatis mutandis* for Y. There do not seem to be any other possibilities. But nothing appears to have been *swapped* in the second and third cases. In each it is surely a more accurate description of the resulting state of affairs that Professor X has been made *like* Professor Y, and vice versa; after all, in each case we could perform the requisite changes upon X while leaving Y unaltered. And so it seems that our original first description of these strange events, that X and Y are the same persons that they were but that each of them has undergone a radical psychological transformation, seems to be the most accurate.

Could I not continue to insist that some entity no matter how abstract, call it perhaps Professor X's 'personality', had been transferred to Professor Y? Well, in these latter two cases there is certainly a causal relationship of some sort between X's original information-state and Y's subsequent information-state. But the question must then arise as to whether this causal relationship is sufficient to sustain the existence of X's personality. We have no good evidence for believing that the human information-state can have any degree of ontological independence such that it could survive in the spatial and temporal interval between Professors X and Y. So talk of X's personality being transferred to Y would appear to be purely metaphorical, a shorter but ontologically somewhat misleading way of saying that Y has come to resemble the way that X was in certain respects. We seem to have exhausted the field. And yet it does not seem to be the case that we are compelled here to accept any explanation of these changes that necessitates granting personhood any kind of ontological status separate from that of the human beings involved.

Might some further light be shed on the identities of Professors X and Y by considering the matter from a first-person viewpoint, by trying to imagine what it would be like to be X as he underwent these changes? But Williams has demonstrated that our first-person intuitions concerning such hypothetical situations can change radically, depending upon the description of the situation and our viewpoint rather than its objective features.²⁶ Although some revisionist identity-theorists like Parfit and Unger continue to place great weight upon first-person intuitions here, a variety of

²⁶ Particularly in 'The Self and the Future', *op.cit.*

unstable intuitions have been generated, even within a single, broadly Parfitian reductionist analysis of personal identity, by such writers as White and Johnston.²⁷ First-person viewpoints, relying as heavily as they do upon the description and context of thought experiments, should perhaps be thought of as a guide to our desires and presuppositions rather than as playing any strong evidential role in determining objective questions of identity.

Viewing personhood as conceptually on a par with genius-hood has, then, at least a therapeutic value. In deciding questions of the continuing identity of geniuses, we have normally no temptation to allot genius-hood an ontological status separate from that of those things which manifest or embody genius, persons. Viewing personhood in the same fashion allows us to solve most puzzle-cases by applying those principles of continuity, primarily biological, which serve paradigm human beings. There remain some intractable hypothetical puzzle-cases: no analysis of these matters, concerning genius-hood or personhood, ought to be expected to offer up clear and determinate solutions to *every* possible or hypothetical situation. But are there any other good reasons for treating personhood in this manner?

III

Treating personhood as a social and moral achievement-term or status-marker has at least the following advantages:

a) Persons are not (contra Strawson) ontologically or referentially basic entities. They are not in this sense entities at all. Since if the debate on persons over the last half-century has taught us anything at all it is that persons would be an irredeemably queer kind of thing, this must be an advantage. It enables us to restrict our basic ontology to the kinds of thing (like human beings) which we know well and can adequately describe with the physical sciences.

b) If 'person' is not a genuine sortal then we have no need to look for any exact sets of necessary and sufficient conditions. Conditions for the application of a membership- or achievement-term can be much looser without the term ceasing to have any practical use. (Anybody who doubts this is invited to come up

²⁷ Stephen L. White in 'Metapsychological Relativism and the Self', *Journal of Philosophy* LXXXVI (1989), pp. 298–323. Mark Johnston in 'Human Beings', *Journal of Philosophy* LXXXIV (1987), pp. 59–83.

with an exact set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a genius; what intrinsic features did Leonardo, Mozart and Einstein share?)

c) Moral status is not something separate which supervenes upon pre-existing properties. Rather it is inextricably entwined with the notions of sociability and mutual intentionality which would justify our ascriptions of personhood on those rare occasions when we feel that they require such justification.

d) Most of us intuitively reach for examples of our fellow human-beings when we consider the notion of personhood. This intuition is respected without being allowed to define our usage here.

e) Nothing in what I have said denies the possibility of making person-ascriptions to non-humans. We ask only that they be sufficiently like us. Physical resemblance would be nice, but is not necessary. We need forms of behaviour that we can sensibly regard as intentional and which manifest some sense of regarding us and our behaviour in the same way.²⁸ It is this that underlies primitive anthropomorphic personhood-ascriptions; spirits, volcanoes, etc. were regarded as behaving intentionally and as open to modifying their behaviour in response to prayer and sacrifices, such modifications being evidence that they regarded *us* as intentional beings.

f) *What else could 'person' be?* Every attempt to sustain personhood as a genuine sortal of some kind has been demolished by waves of ever more ingenious thought experiments from psychological continuity proponents. The flimsy frameworks of psychological relationships that are left are far too tenuous to support any kind of ontological commitment, and seem inevitably to lead towards eliminativism. Regarding 'person' as a kind of status-marker at least preserves it as a useful term in both philosophical and everyday discourse.

Treating 'person' as a kind of achievement-term also helps to counteract a noticeable tendency towards a barely-concealed Cartesianism amongst psychological-continuity theorists. Human

²⁸ In the case of created beings and machines, the question of personhood-ascriptions may be separate from or orthogonal to the AI question of whether or not such beings 'really' think or feel. In the film *2001*, any willingness to ascribe personhood to the computer HAL was caused by 'his' ability to manifest a variety of behaviour sufficient to lead his fellow astronauts into treating him as a person. The more HAL could be integrated into a community of social beings and their behaviour, the less important the question of whether he 'really' feels or thinks becomes; after all, no one worries over whether *I* really have qualia!

psychology is not the kind of thing that can be peeled off its human owner/instantiator and given its own survival conditions; it is not a *thing* at all, as I hope that comparing it to human genius has shown. And, in concentrating attention upon our essentially animal nature my analysis might help to support a claim, often ignored or denied by psychological-continuity theorists, that my animal continuity, my continued existence into the future as the same human being I am now, might have an intrinsic value which ought to be taken into account in considerations of diachronic survival. It also brings to the fore once again something which often tends to get lost under the welter of first-person and almost solipsistic accounts of survival, that personhood, like morality, is an inescapably social matter.

Against all of these considerations, it can be argued that such a view of personhood does little or nothing to provide answers to what are regarded as important puzzle-cases. I deny that this is always the case. As the discussion of genius shows, many apparently puzzling cases can best be described (and possibly solved) in terms of ontologically and referentially more basic entities. Puzzles about the continuity of geniuses collapse into puzzles about the continuity of persons. And these latter, I suggest, can best be approached by collapsing them into puzzles about the continuity of human beings.

Many of the problems raised by Parfit and others can now be seen as problems about *human* continuity and about the morality or prudence of certain kinds of future survival as less than paradigm specimens of humanity. There will, of course, remain debates about whether animals, robots, etc. can ever become (be treated as) persons, though I suspect that philosophical debates about personhood will have less importance than our actual social practices. Much that was confused or difficult can perhaps be cleared up or put on a new footing, provided only that we come to accept that personhood, like geniushood, has no identity-conditions of its own, that 'person' is not a genuine sortal at all but rather a marker of social achievement and development.²⁹

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²⁹ I am grateful to Nick Everitt and Tim Chappell for a number of discussions on this topic, and to an anonymous referee for some valuable suggestions.