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Title	Personal Identity Matters
Type	Article
URL	<a href="https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/53330/">https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/53330/</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.5406/21543682.53.2.01">https://doi.org/10.5406/21543682.53.2.01</a>
Date	2024
Citation	Bloor, Graham Ernest (2024) Personal Identity Matters. <i>Process Studies</i> , 53 (2). pp. 151-171. ISSN 0360-6503
Creators	Bloor, Graham Ernest

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.  
<https://doi.org/10.5406/21543682.53.2.01>

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## **DRAFT PROCESS STUDIES ARTICLE: “PERSONAL IDENTITY MATTERS”**

***ABSTRACT:** This article considers whether process philosophy can provide a more promising basis for understanding the closely related problems of persons and personal identity than more traditional or mainstream philosophical approaches. In particular, the article focuses on whether process conceptions of persons and personal identity provides an approach which offers greater potential for resolving the duplication and fission examples within the literature in this area, than the approaches taken by Bernard Williams and Derek Parfit.*

### **The problems of persons and personal identity**

If there is an aspect of process thought that has not been adequately explored by Whitehead scholarship, it is surely its significance for the debate on personal identity (Mingarelli 87).

In her 2013 *Process Studies* article, “Is Personal Identity Something That Does Not Matter?: An Enquiry Into Derek Parfit and Alfred N. Whitehead,” Mingarelli continues by explaining that the only *detailed* examination of both Whitehead’s and Hartshorne’s perspectives on personal identity is *Personal Identity, the Self, and Ethics* by Ferdinand Santos and Santiago Sia. Although many prominent process writers do consider issues pertaining to persons and personal identity, there does appear to be a shortfall of detailed analysis and discussion in this area. In order to help to address this shortfall therefore, my primary aim in this article is to consider whether process philosophy can provide a more promising basis for understanding the closely related problems of persons and personal identity than more traditional or mainstream philosophical approaches.

The problem of persons concerns the notion of ‘personhood’ or ‘selfhood’. To solve the problem, one must answer the deceptively simple question: “what is a person?” The problem of personal identity relates to what identifies a person as the *same* person over time. Santos and Sia adopt Paul Ricoeur’s terminology in this context and distinguish between “ipse-identity” meaning “himself” or “itself,” with the associated emphasis on the nature of selfhood or what we have termed ‘personhood,’ and

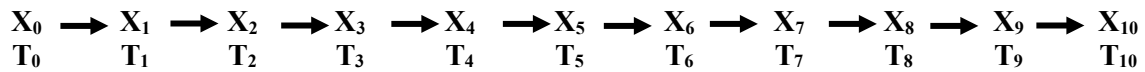
“idem-identity” meaning “the same,” with its associated emphasis on diachronic “sameness” or identity (Santos and Sia 2). These two issues are clearly closely related as any discussion of “sameness” must first consider the kind of entity which is believed to maintain its identity over time.

My discussion proceeds by considering two approaches to persons and personal identity which fall broadly within the materialist tradition, namely those of Bernard Williams and Derek Parfit, before moving on to consider the Whiteheadian approach to these issues. In the context of a wider discussion of these three approaches to persons and personal identity, I focus more specifically on their relative merits in addressing the implications of hypothetical fission and duplication examples.

### **Williams on persons and personal identity**

Materialist approaches to persons and personal identity often take persons to be individual physical entities or bodies. Bernard Williams, for example, develops an account of personal identity based on bodily identity and bodily continuity. Williams essentially holds that an individual person is a material body which is continuous in both time and space, and that bodily identity is a necessary condition for personal identity.<sup>1</sup> His emphasis on the concept of spatio temporal *continuity* within this criterion though is an acknowledgement that a person’s body is not constituted of exactly the same material over time, as cells and their constituent molecules and atoms are regenerated and replaced. This view is confirmed, for example, by the biologist Steven Rose when he observes that, “Our bodies are in continuous flux. Nothing about us as organisms is permanent” (Rose 38). For Rose, organisms should be viewed as “open systems” in which, “Every molecule, every organelle, every cell, is in a constant state of flux, of formation, transformation and renewal. Dynamic stability of form persists, although every constituent of that form has been replaced” (Rose 306-7).

Williams’ concept of bodily continuity is thus intended to accommodate these compositional changes over time. For the purpose of the current discussion, we will assume that over a period of say ten years, every particle within a person’s body is replaced.<sup>2</sup> For a person ‘X’ this might be represented by the following diagram:



**Figure 1**

Figure 1 represents the case of a person ‘X’ living through a period of ten years from  $T_0$  to  $T_{10}$ , where  $X_0$  to  $X_{10}$  represent the different person-stages at the end of each of the ten years. There will be many other person stages during each of the years, of course, but in the interests of clarity and simplicity these have been omitted. In order to illustrate Williams’ concept of bodily continuity and to provide a reference point for further discussion, the key points to note with regard to Figure 1 are:

1. None of the subsequent person-stages, including  $X_1$  to  $X_{10}$ , will be strictly identical to  $X_0$  in the sense of their being exactly the same physical body.
2. On the basis of the assumptions we have made,  $X_{10}$  will possess none of the particles which composed the original  $X_0$ . Nonetheless,  $X_{10}$  is bodily *continuous* with the original  $X_0$  in that there is a continuous, unbroken spatio-temporal chain between them.
3. For the purpose of later discussion, it will be assumed that the process of change is even, such that we can say that  $X_5$  at  $T_5$  possesses exactly 50% of the original particles of  $X_0$ .

In “Personal Identity and Individuation,” Williams’ case for bodily continuity being a necessary condition of personal identity addresses “change-of-body” arguments which seek to demonstrate that it is possible to make sense of personal identity without reference to a person’s physical body.

Williams cites Locke’s theory of personal identity in this context, which he takes to assert “that there is no conceivable situation in which bodily identity would be necessary” (*Problems* 1). Williams more specifically references Book II Chapter 27 of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* which includes Locke’s “prince and cobbler” example, wherein he imagines “the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince’s past life” entering and informing “the body of a cobbler” .

Following his memory-based, psychological continuity approach to personal identity, Locke

concludes that, “everyone sees he would be the same person with the prince, accountable only for the prince’s actions” (Locke 216).

Williams does not agree that such change-of-body arguments demonstrate that psychological criteria provide a sufficient basis for personal identity. In “Personal Identity and Individuation,” Williams develops his own counter-example in which he asks us to imagine the case of Charles whose memories and character are suddenly replaced by those of the historical character Guy Fawkes. Williams initially acknowledges that in such a scenario it would be tempting to say that, following psychological criteria such as memory and character, Charles (or “sometime Charles”) has now become Guy Fawkes. However for Williams, if it is logically possible for Charles to suddenly have his memories and character replaced by those of Guy Fawkes, then it is equally possible for his imaginary brother Robert to undergo the same changes simultaneously. In such a case, Williams maintains that, “They cannot both be Guy Fawkes” since if they were, then “Guy Fawkes would be in two places at once,” which he holds would be “absurd” (*Problems* 8). Williams believes that the best description in such a case would be to say that both Charles and Robert have become exactly similar to Guy Fawkes, and that this must also be the best description if only one of them underwent the specified changes, since Charles’ identity cannot be impacted by what happens to Robert, and vice versa. On the grounds that duplication of memory and character can always be conceived to occur therefore, Williams concludes that such psychological criteria cannot be sufficient grounds for personal identity.

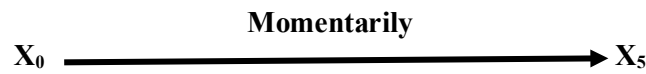
It is clear then that, in Williams’ view, duplication considerations prevent psychological continuity criteria from providing a sufficient basis for personal identity. For Williams, identity must always be a one-to-one relation and never a one-to-many relation. The question which inevitably arises, and which Williams anticipates, is whether a bodily continuity criterion for personal identity can avoid similar duplication based objections. In “Bodily Continuity and Personal Identity,” Williams considers the possibility of “a man splitting, amoeba-like, into two simulacra of himself” (*Problems* 23). Williams’ response is to maintain that in such a case of fission, “the resultant items are not, in the strict sense, spatio-temporally continuous with the original” (*Problems* 24). In “Are Persons Bodies?,” Williams

also considers David Wiggins' brain-split example where each half of a split brain is implanted into two separate bodies, and it is supposed that each half-brain fully possesses the memories and character of the original person. Wiggins' argument is that in such a case, each of the two resulting persons is materially continuous with the original person through its half of the original brain. Consequently, Wiggins holds that each of the resultant persons has an equally valid claim to being the same person as the original (see Wiggins 52ff.) . Williams' response to Wiggins' brain-split example is essentially similar to his answer to his own amoeba-like fission example in that he believes that a sufficiently rigorous and full sense of bodily continuity in space and time will avoid such duplication (or what he terms "reduplication") problems. Williams maintains that:

... the reduplication problem arises if a supposed criterion of identity allows there to be two distinct items, B and C, each of which satisfies the criterion in just the way it would if the other did not exist. But this is not so with bodily continuity; what is true of B when it is in the ordinary way continuous with A is just not the same as what is true of it when, together with C, it has been produced from A by fission (*Problems* 77-8).

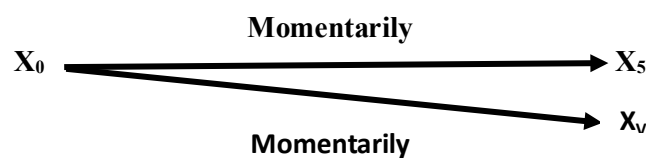
Williams' position then appears to be that a 50:50 fission example, whether entailing a full body split as in his own amoeba-like example, or the division of the key physical organ of the brain as in Wiggins' example, breaches his criterion of bodily continuity. If we revisit our earlier discussion of changes in bodily composition in relation to Figure 1 above, however, it is not clear that these 50:50 fission examples do represent a breakdown in the concept of bodily continuity. If we consider the case of  $X_5$  at  $T_5$  and we follow our earlier assumption that regeneration of bodily particles occurs evenly over the ten year period of full replacement, then  $X_5$  will share 50% of its composition with the original person  $X_0$  at  $T_0$ . Given that this scenario is designed to approximate to the situation in the real world, then presumably Williams would agree that this satisfies his bodily continuity criterion as there is a clear chain of spatio-continuity between  $X_0$  and  $X_5$ . Moreover, it seems fair to say that we would also normally identify  $X_0$  and  $X_5$  as the same person. Developing this example a little further, we can imagine a possible world in which the process of bodily regeneration takes place more quickly such

that the time taken for  $X_0$  to become  $X_5$  is a moment in time rather than five years. We might represent this situation diagrammatically as follows:



**Figure 2**

If all that has changed in this scenario is the rate or speed of regeneration and replacement, then bodily continuity and therefore identity would still appear to hold between  $X_0$  and  $X_5$ . In this situation, only 50% of  $X_0$ 's bodily particles survive a moment later in  $X_5$ . The next question which arises is then, what would our conclusion be if the other 50% of  $X_0$ 's bodily particles were to survive as say  $X_v$ , as per Figure 3?:



**Figure 3**

Much as Charles' identity in Williams' Guy Fawkes example cannot be impacted by what happens to Robert, it follows that Williams cannot claim that  $X_0$  and  $X_5$  are the same person in Figure 2, but not in Figure 3. Indeed it is difficult to know what Williams' response would be to this situation. His rejection of bodily continuity being satisfied in his amoeba-like fission example suggests that 50% physical continuity is insufficient for bodily continuity to hold, and the minimum percentage sameness of bodily particles would have to be at the very least  $>50\%$ . However, if fission occurred such that we had 50.1% and 49.9% rather than a straight 50%:50% split, is it clear that the 50.1% part would be continuous and therefore the same person, while the marginally less continuous 49.9% part

would not be? Any benchmark here would surely seem condemned to a degree of arbitrariness at the very least. Additionally, if Williams were to reject 50% bodily continuity being satisfied in our momentary example occurring in say 0.1 seconds, but not in 5 years, where would he draw the line in between these periods? Again any benchmark would appear somewhat arbitrary. Overall therefore it seems reasonable to conclude that duplication issues are problematic, and possibly even terminal, for any clear one-to-one identity relation being established on the basis of bodily continuity.

### **Parfit on persons and personal identity**

Derek Parfit<sup>3</sup> follows the implications of the duplication arguments above, in relation to both psychological and bodily continuity criteria for personal identity, through to a radical conclusion – namely, that a person’s identity is not always a determinate matter (*Reasons* 216). Thus Parfit believes that the simple or “common sense” view that questions about a person’s identity and survival must always have a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, is “false” (“What Matters” 97). He holds that there is no additional or further fact beyond psychological relations and properties wherein personal identity lies, but rather, a person’s identity is reducible to such psychological relations and properties. This is what Parfit terms his “constitutive reductionism” whereby he holds that there is nothing more to being a person than the series of mental and physical events, the psychological relations and properties that are constitutive of it. On Parfit’s reductionist account of persons therefore, personal identity can be fully described and explained in terms of a “complex” of such properties and relations. Indeed, what fundamentally matters for Parfit in relation to survival as a person, is what he terms “Relation R” which he describes as, “psychological connectedness and/or continuity with the right kind of cause” (*Reasons* 215). Immediately following this statement he adds the “more controversial” claim that the “right kind of cause” could in fact be “any cause” (*Reasons* 215). Parfit also provides us with the following definitions:

*Psychological connectedness* is the holding of particular direct psychological connections.

*Psychological continuity* is the holding of overlapping chains of *strong* connectedness (*Reasons* 206).



Developing this a little further, Parfit holds that a person X today is psychologically connected to a person Y yesterday, if X possesses character traits and memory beliefs of Y based on some causal connection. The degree of possession of Y's character traits and memory beliefs can be variable for Parfit, and therefore the relation of psychological connectedness is said to admit of degrees.

Psychological continuity, on the other hand, is a transitive relation for Parfit, and therefore does not admit of degrees ("PIR" 232). Generally, Parfit believes that psychological connectedness is more important<sup>4</sup> to personal survival, whereas questions of personal identity are to be understood in terms of psychological continuity.<sup>5</sup>

A further key feature of Parfit's account of personal identity is his contention that the notions of personal identity and survival must be divorced. In "Personal Identity," Parfit utilizes Wiggins' brain split example to illustrate his reasoning. It will be recalled that in Wiggins' example, the brain is divided in two and each half is then implanted in a separate body, with the two resulting persons both having the original person's memories and character. On a conventional understanding, (that is, where questions of personal identity and survival are not divorced), Parfit maintains that there are only three possible answers to the question "What happens to me? ... (1) I do not survive; (2) I survive as one of the two people; (3) I survive as both" ("PI" 144). For Parfit, however, none of these three answers is satisfactory on the conventional understanding. With respect to response (1), Parfit argues that if only one half of the brain survives, it seems to follow that I survive and hence in the case of both halves surviving, he asks "How could a double success be a failure?" ("PI" 144). The problem with response (2) for Parfit is that there is no way to differentiate in favour of one survivor rather than the other. Finally, response (3) fails according to Parfit because if survival entails identity, and identity is a one-to-one relation, then I cannot be identical with both of the resultant persons. Parfit's proposed way out of this dilemma therefore is to break the link between survival and identity from which it follows that, "We can suggest that I survive as two different people without implying that I am these people" ("PI" 146). Hence he believes that Wiggins' example demonstrates that questions of personal survival need not be one-to-one, and that the relation of the original person to the two resulting persons, "contains all that interests us – all that matters – in any ordinary case of survival" ("PI" 148). He acknowledges

that Wiggins' example is unlikely to occur and that the use of identity language in everyday life is "convenient," but warns us that such language can "lead us astray" ("PI" 148).

The key question which arises at this point is whether we can make sense of survival as more than one person, and whether Parfit's account can ever fully do justice to a person's sense of continuous self-identity over time. Terence Penelhum challenges Parfit by maintaining that we have a strong sense of continuous self-identity throughout our lives, and that it is not possible for a person to non-identify with his or her self in the past.

That part of us from which we wish to dissociate ourselves is as much a part of us as that with which we wish to identify (Penelhum 671).

If we apply this to Wiggins' brain-split example therefore, Penelhum is effectively saying that it is not possible to look back on pre-split events without *identifying* with the self that experienced them in the past. John Perry in "The Importance of Being Identical" also emphasizes the key importance of concern for *self*, and maintains that there is a fundamental difference in my level of concern when it is my self who is to be involved in a road traffic accident, rather than someone else.

You learn that someone will be run over by a truck tomorrow; you are saddened, feel pity, and think reflectively about the frailty of life; one bit of information is added, that the someone is you, and a whole new set of emotions rise in your breast ("Identical" 67).

Given the fundamental importance of such concern for self therefore, Perry struggles to make sense of a claim on Parfit's lines that survival can admit of degrees. In response to scenarios which are interpreted as neither a clear-cut case of my death nor my survival, Perry asks, "how should I feel about such a case?" ("Identical" 68). Parfit's response to arguments such as those of Penelhum and Perry, is to acknowledge that most people are inclined, at some level, to reject his kind of view but that by so doing, they are assuming that personal identity is a "further fact" ("What Matters" 101). According to Parfit, however, there is nothing in reality which corresponds to such a "further fact." In response to Penelhum, Parfit further argues that the belief that our identity through time is "all-or-

nothing” by nature, and that “all the parts of our lives are as much ours” is “not a deep but a trivial truth” (“Importance” 685-6).

The debate between what Parfit characterizes as the “simple” approach to personal identity and his more “complex” constitutive reductionist account, ultimately seems to boil down to two difficulties or weaknesses, one of which is inherent in each position. On the “simple view,” it seems very difficult, if not impossible, to identify the “further fact” on which a person’s constant identity over time is based. On the complex view, on the other hand, Parfit’s account struggles to give an adequate account of the uniqueness and unity of the self. In particular, as Perry expresses above, it is not clear that it can fully do justice to concern for self. In the case of Williams’ amoeba-like fission case or Wiggins’ brain-split scenario, for example, should I be selfishly concerned or not on Parfit’s lines, if I am told that one, or other, or both of the resultant persons is to be tortured in the morning?

### **Process perspectives on persons and personal identity**

I feel very confident that the conception of organism, of societies of entities feeling each other, compounded of each other’s feelings, is Whitehead’s primary achievement (Hartshorne, “Compound” 55).

In this section, I will outline some key features of the process account of persons and personal identity, and emphasize the importance of the concept of the dominant occasion (or dominating ‘unit’) within this account. In the subsequent section, I will then develop an initial process case towards resolving the duplication problems of personal identity which is more promising than the materialist approaches of Williams and Parfit.

The central doctrine of Whiteheadian process philosophy is that the ultimate constituents of reality are “actual entities” or “actual occasions” in a process of change (*PR* 18, 22). It is therefore crucially a philosophy of ‘becoming’ in contrast to ‘being’. It is a vision of a universe in which nothing remains

static from one moment to the next. Reality is constituted of a countless number of these discrete, microscopic ‘occasions’ each of which endures for but a moment. These individual occasions are grouped together in ‘societies’ (that is, more or less ordered groups of occasions).

Rather than falling within the materialist tradition, process metaphysics is also characterised as panpsychist in that it holds that each occasion is psychophysical in nature. The physical activity of an occasion is its absorption of the actual occasions of the past and represents the occasion’s direct embodiment of the environment from which it sprang. Whitehead’s system is also importantly therefore a relational metaphysics in which every novel occasion is inter-related with all past occasions (to some degree at least). Each momentary occasion, in Whitehead’s terminology, therefore “feels” or “prehends”<sup>6</sup> all previous occasions, and synthesizes the influence of the past with its own creative urge. This creative urge represents the mental side of an occasion, by means of which it makes a novel, unified reaction to its inheritance through its awareness of potentialities other than simple repetition of the actualities which preceded it.

Process philosophy distinguishes between (mere) ‘*aggregates*’ or ‘*composites*’ of occasions with no unity of experience such as rocks, and what it calls ‘*true*’ or ‘*compound*’ individuals who possess a unified experience. The latter are best exemplified by the higher animals, including humans. The process view of human and nonhuman persons thus develops from the belief that ‘*occasions*’ group together in ‘*societies*’. The higher order animals (including humans) are natural or ‘monarchical’ societies of occasions which are unified by ‘presiding’ or ‘dominant’ occasions,<sup>7</sup> whereas less self-ordered entities such as rocks lack such unity and are seen as merely groups or ‘*democracies*’ of occasions. Whitehead uses the analogy of a complex amplifier to express how a dominant occasion arises in the human body.

... the human body is to be conceived as a complex ‘amplifier’ ... The various actual entities, which compose the body are so coordinated that the experiences of any part of the body are transmitted to one or more central occasions to be inherited with enhancements accruing upon

the way, or finally added by reason of the final integration. The enduring personality is the historic route of living occasions which are severally dominant in the body at successive instants (*PR* 119).

The human body then for Whitehead is a vast society of “millions upon millions” of occasions and cells which are subject to the unified control of dominant occasions. The “organ of central control,” which he describes as having a “very high-grade character,” is located in the brain where it gives rise to “consciousness of a unified experience” (*PR* 108). Hence it is the dominant or presiding occasion which is also the seat of consciousness for Whitehead. The millions of cells or cellular occasions which comprise the human body are also “true” individuals, centres of life in their own right for Whitehead, but when they are grouped together in the highly ordered society of the human body, they give rise to a higher level of mentality in the form of human consciousness which unifies the body. He thus paints a dynamic picture of a human being as a highly ordered society which experiences constant mutual interactions between the presiding or dominant occasion and the millions of other occasions within the body. It is noteworthy in this regard that Whitehead still chooses to talk of a human ‘soul’. This should not of course be taken to refer to a Cartesian ego or a purely immaterial substance. Rather, for Whitehead, the term ‘soul’ is used to refer to the unified sequence of momentary occasions of experience which comprise the life history of a person. More specifically, the soul is therefore primarily identified with the “dominant” or “presiding” occasion which unifies a person and makes the self an integrated whole (Cobb, *Christian* 19).

A distinctive feature of Whitehead’s original account of dominant occasions is that they are conceived of as individual occasions in their own right which are distinct from, although dependent upon, the subordinate occasions over which they preside. Whitehead describes dominant or presiding occasions as (probably) “wandering” about in the empty spaces of the brain.

The route of presiding occasions probably wanders from part to part of the brain, dissociated from the physical material atoms (*PR* 109).

A potential source of difficulty here for Whitehead's original account is whether dominant occasions should be conceived of as spatially minuscule in extension, as above, or as more holistic and spatially inclusive of their subordinate occasions. Arguably, his analogy of the complex amplifier is suggestive of a more pervasive and holistic phenomenon,<sup>8</sup> a sort of *uber effect* which arises as a result of the particular configuration of occasions which make up the organism of a human body. John Cobb, for example, takes issue with Whitehead on just this point.

In opposition to Whitehead's view, I suggest that the soul may occupy a considerable region of the brain including both empty space and the regions occupied by many societies. This proposal assumes that it is possible for the region that constitutes the standpoint of one occasion to include the regions that constitute the standpoints of other occasions (*Christian* 44).

Cobb's preference therefore is for a more holistic or more "compound" version of dominant occasions, which appears to draw more directly on Hartshorne's approach than Whitehead's.<sup>9</sup> For Hartshorne, "all individuals apparent to the senses are compounded of numerous smaller individuals" ("Compound" 42), and the human body is to be viewed as "a vast nexus or interlocked colony of relatively low grade individuals, which, in varying degrees, are subject to the control of the human mind" ("Compound" 55). In Cobb's own words, "Hartshorne ... holds that where there is a true compound individual there is a "dominating *unit*"<sup>10</sup> which "*includes* the constituent entities without reducing their own substantial identity" ("Overcoming" 158; *my emphasis*). Notably therefore, Whitehead's "dominant occasion" has become the "dominating *unit*" which is a more compounded and inclusive concept. For Cobb and for Hartshorne, the unified subjectivity of the compound individual, of the human person, is thus a more pervasive phenomenon and represents a reality over and above the component individuals or "occasions" comprising the society.

For a human being, Whitehead's dominant or presiding occasion, or Hartshorne's "dominating unit," arises from a highly ordered personal society. It represents the seat of consciousness and it is the key constituent in an enduring person. It is therefore also the central element in the process approach to, and understanding of, personal identity. On a Whiteheadian basis, personal identity over time is

conceived of as a route of a society of millions of actual occasions which are temporally contiguous and successive, and which are presided over by an intimately related route of dominant occasions which unify the experience of this personal society. Whitehead talks of “the linear seriality of human occasions within any one personality” (*AI* 189). On this view, the human person, far from being one enduring actuality or subject undergoing many adventures, is in fact a temporal series of momentary selves, each with its own experience. Hence for Hartshorne, “Concretely there is a new man each moment” (“Development” 55), and any “timelessly the same self” is, strictly speaking, an “abstraction” from the series of momentary selves (*LP* 122). On these lines, I can include my past experiences and count them as mine only because there has been a continuous overlapping in the subjective forms of my experience. It is in this continuous overlapping and massive underlying similarity that my continuous identity as a person is held to lie.<sup>11</sup>

A final point to note in this summary of the process account of persons and personal identity is that, implicit in this analysis, is a concept of memory, or what we might call *prehensive* memory, which in its primitive or primary form comprises our awareness or prehension of the immediate past from a moment ago. For this reason Santos and Sia prefer to use the term “mnemonic” to the term “remembered,” because the latter term is so loaded with connotations of conscious awareness, whereas “mnemonic,” from the Greek *mnema* or *mnemeoin*, is a memorial or record of a person or thing, especially one which is already dead (Santos and Sia 13). Hence they believe that Hartshorne, for example, differs from other philosophers who have sought to explain the continuity of personal identity in terms of memory, because he has this wider or deeper sense of memory which lacks the fallibility of mediate or remote memory (Santos and Sia 190).

### **Towards a process case for resolving duplication problems**

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, ... I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. ... 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 perpetual flux and movement (Hume 301-302).

On the basis of our discussion above, it seems fair to say that Parfit and process philosophy share the fundamental Humean insight that there is no actual entity which corresponds directly to a constant subjective self. Hence, rather than accept such a substantialist view of the self, “Hartshorne appears to lean more toward the views expressed by Hume, Parfit, and the reductionists” (Santos and Sia 69). There are then clear lines of intersection between the process and Parfitian approaches to personal identity. Both approaches would embrace Hume’s general observation that all one is aware of are the many and varied experiences which give rise to the self at any particular moment. However, both would strictly disagree with Hume that personal identity is a fictitious notion. Rather, both view personal identity as a convenient shorthand which is useful and natural in everyday life, but which can conceal deeper and more complex truths. Both approaches also speak of past and earlier selves, or successive selves. As we have seen, for Hartshorne, “Concretely there is a new man each moment” (“Development” 55), and any “timelessly the same self” is, strictly speaking, an “abstraction” from the series of momentary selves (*LP* 122). Parfit also suggests that it is “surprisingly natural” to think in terms of earlier and future selves (“PI” 160), although he cautions that talk about ‘successive selves’ should be viewed as a “façon de parler” which could be misleading if taken as anything more (“PI” 162, footnote 37, added in 1976). The liberation from a constant self and the associated undermining of any absolute boundaries separating selves, which both Parfit’s and Hartshorne’s accounts share, also have common ethical implications. Like Parfit, Hartshorne also regards substantialistic notions of a person as foundational to an ethics of self-interest (Santos and Sia 224), and again, like Parfit, Hartshorne’s rejection of the primacy of self-interest in our ethical and social relationships grounds his reflections on the identity of persons (Santos and Sia 220-221).

At the end of our section on ‘Parfit on persons and personal identity’ above, we observed that both the simple view of persons as constant selves over time, and Parfit’s more complex, constitutive reductionist account, have significant difficulties to overcome. On the “simple view,” on the one



hand, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to identify the “further fact” on which a person’s constant identity over time is based. On the complex view, on the other hand, Parfit’s account struggles to give an adequate account of the uniqueness and unity of the self. The question which arises therefore is whether the process approach can avoid both of these difficulties.<sup>12</sup>

Firstly, it seems clear that both Parfit and process philosophy avoid any claim that there is some “further fact” on which a concept of a constant self is based. Both deny that there is a permanent self or substance which remains constant through time and to which accidents and events happen. A key difference between the two in this regard, however, is that the process view is based on a comprehensive metaphysic which denies *any* permanence within reality. Hence whereas Parfit falls broadly within the materialist tradition and conceives of life as a continuous “horizontal line,” where what is important for psychological continuity and connectedness (and therefore for his ‘Relation R’) “is the absence of breaks in it,” for Whiteheadian metaphysics life is conceived of as “a progressive spiral where every moment surpasses the others, while integrating them in a new form” (Mingarelli 104). This process of integration as we have seen is also built upon a stronger and wider sense of ‘prehesive’ memory or ‘mnemonic’ inheritance which is not subject to the constant fallibility of conscious recollection, and which provides a foundation for the social nature and the inter-relatedness of all reality, thereby undermining any absolute boundaries separating selves.

Secondly, in relation to providing an adequate account of the uniqueness and unity of the self, a further significant difference between Parfit and process philosophy is that the latter conceives of reality as being comprised of a countless number of actualities or ‘*occasions*,’ psychophysical unit-events, which are grouped together in ‘*societies*’. These societies provide a unified centre in which experience can take place. Moreover, in highly ordered personal societies such as a human body, the millions of occasions or unit events comprising the society are presided over by a dominant occasion or dominating “unit”. As we have seen, some leading process thinkers such as Cobb in particular, have moved away from Whitehead’s original conception of a dominant occasion in a “true” individual which (probably) inhabits the empty spaces in the brain, to a more holistic view of a dominating *unit* which pervades and controls the “*compound*” individual. When occasions of experience are

configured in an organism such as the human body, this *uber effect* occurs which creates a coherent, compound individual with consciousness which experiences or “feels” its constituent parts, and is able to exert a centralized control over them. On these lines therefore when a person feels pain, for example, the dominating unit wherein lies the consciousness of pain, is feeling the pain of all those constituent cells within its body which are also in pain – it is “feeling of derived feeling” (Whitehead, *PR* 81); “societies of entities feeling each other, compounded of each other’s feelings” (Hartshorne, “Compound” 55).

If we return to Williams’ amoeba-like splitting of a person’s body or Wiggins’ brain-split example, we can ask whether process philosophy has the potential to provide a better solution to such duplication problems than either Williams or Parfit. Firstly with regard to Williams, we have argued that his account of personal identity in terms of bodily continuity is vulnerable to duplication arguments. With Parfit, on the other hand, such duplication examples lead him to hold that we must divorce identity and survival, and that identity is not always a determinate matter. As we have observed, however, it is unclear in these duplication scenarios, whether I should be selfishly concerned or not on Parfit’s lines, if I am told that one, or other, or both of the resultant persons is to be tortured in the morning.

On the process account of persons and personal identity we have seen the central role played by the “dominant occasion” or “dominating unit.” In considering these duplication scenarios therefore, perhaps the answer to whether I retain my identity as a person and survive, lies in whether a sufficient proportion of the body, or of the key organ of the brain, survives to support the dominant occasion or dominating unit. On both Whitehead’s original conception and the more holistic conception of Hartshorne and Cobb, the unification and centralization of experience and control is still achieved by an “occasion.” The key difference is that for Whitehead, this is (probably) conceived of as a single occasion in the empty spaces of the brain, whereas Cobb, for instance, “... assumes that it is possible for the region that constitutes the standpoint of *one occasion* to *include* the regions that constitute the standpoints of other occasions” (*Christian* 44; *my emphasis*). In other words, Cobb postulates that it may be possible for a single dominating occasion to be spatially inclusive of other occasions within

the brain. What is significant on either interpretation is that “actual occasions,” or “actual entities” as they are also termed by Whitehead, are the “Final Realities, or Res Verae” (*PR* 22). They are therefore irreducible and cannot by definition be split into components. Hence, in any fission scenario, the single dominant occasion cannot be split and can only conceivably survive in, at most, one of the two halves. In relation to the question “but would I feel pain?,” any selfish concern in relation to *my* survival would rest in the answer, “does my dominant occasion survive?” Hence the relation between personal identity and personal survival would be retained. We saw earlier that according to Parfit, there are on a “conventional” or “simple” view of personal identity (that is, where questions of personal identity and survival are not divorced), only three possible answers to the question “What happens to me? ... (1) I do not survive; (2) I survive as one of the two people; (3) I survive as both” (“PI” 144). Moreover, he rejects response (2) on the basis that there is no way to differentiate in favour of one survivor rather than the other. If identity and survival, however, rest in the fate of a single, indivisible dominant occasion or dominating unit, this would at least provide a theoretical basis for differentiation. I survive, where my dominant occasion survives.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly the concept of the “dominant occasion” or “dominating unit” requires more detailed analysis if it is indeed going to provide a solution to the duplication problems of personal identity. The relatively recent work which has been done on this area by Santos and Sia, and Mingarelli, concurs that process philosophy places greater emphasis on the unity of experience than reductionists such as Parfit. Mingarelli, for example, concludes that:

Whitehead preserves a sense of personal identity, ... personal identity is the comprehensive whole where all experiences (parts) are inserted. The experiences are not merely continuous with each other, but they are inter- and intra-related, forming structured and thus personal, *processes* ... Personal identity is, then, an inescapable element in human life. It is not a “further” fact, if by “further” we mean concrete reality and beyond a reasonable

understanding of it. Nevertheless, it is “further” in the sense that it is not reducible to any concrete entity. Personal identity, for Whitehead, is an emergent fact from within the structure of experience.... (Mingarelli 105).

Whilst this quotation pulls together many of the central themes in our discussion above of the process account of persons and personal identity, my suggestion is that we may be able to strengthen the process account further by focusing more directly on the concept of the “dominant occasion” or “dominating unit” as the basis for, or the locus of, a person’s identity. In the current article therefore, I have sought to establish at least an initial case for placing greater emphasis on this key concept both as a basis for understanding persons and personal identity, and as an approach towards resolving the duplication problems of personal identity which is more promising than the materialist approaches of Williams and Parfit.

## ENDNOTES

1. While Williams does not articulate a comprehensive materialist metaphysic, it nonetheless seems appropriate to characterize his bodily continuity account of persons and personal identity as 'materialist'. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Williams rejects any ontological distinction between psychological and material phenomena, and maintains that P.F. Strawson's distinction between 'M-predicates' and 'P-predicates' is guilty of allowing "the Cartesian spectre in at the back door" (*Problems* 124). Moreover, he proposes that "we should make sense of how natural science can be absolute knowledge of reality," and further maintains that "There is no obvious impossibility in the idea that the natural sciences should be able to give absolute explanations of a determinate and realistically conceived world" (*Descartes* 302). Hence it seems reasonable to concur with John Perry's assessment that "Williams thinks that persons are material objects" ("Reviewed" 416).

2. Although a simplification for the purpose of the current discussion, a period of ten years is intended as a reasonable average in the real world. Even if this is disputed, however, a world in which every component particle in a person's body is regenerated and replaced every ten years is at the very least a possible world.

3. As with Williams above, Parfit tends to assume a materialist metaphysical framework rather than articulate such a foundation in detail (as Mingarelli observes, his metaphysics is "tacit" and "strongly contrasts" with Whitehead's (Mingarelli 88)). Although Parfit believes that physical continuity is the least important element in a person's continued existence (*Reasons* 284), he nevertheless holds that I should always have a body sufficiently like my own to allow for full psychological connectedness (*Reasons* 285). Furthermore, in articulating his "Complex View" of personal identity, which is grounded in criteria of psychological continuities such as memory, character, intention etc. , he explicitly states that these in turn "rest upon bodily continuity" ("PIR" 227). Hence as we shall see, while Parfit's account of persons and personal identity is built primarily upon psychological relations, and in particular his "Relation R," it is clear that these are ultimately dependent upon an underlying bodily and physical reality, and therefore that there are good grounds for classifying Parfit as a materialist.

4. This appears to be the consensus position in Parfit's writings. See, for example, "Importance" 685 where he states that "If we take the Complex View, it will be the strength of these connections that we think important"; and "PI" 157, "connectedness is a more important element in survival." In footnote 37 which was added in 1976 to "PI" 162, however, he seems to waiver a little on this position: "I should not have claimed that connectedness was more important than continuity. I now think that neither relation can be shown to be more important than the other." Yet in *Reasons* 206, he is back to saying that, "connectedness is more important both in theory and in practice."

5. There are some possible conceptual issues with Parfit's account here, in that if psychological continuity is derivative on "chains of strong connectedness" as per the definitions above, it is difficult to see how the former relation (psychological continuity) does not admit of degrees, when the relation on which it is based (psychological connectedness) does. This issue is made more acute by the fact that Parfit seems unable to specify clearly what will count as enough direct connections for the strong connectedness on which psychological continuity is based. In *Reasons* 206 he suggests "at least half" as a rough guide to what would count as sufficient direct psychological connectedness for personal identity to hold from one day until the next, but he does not elucidate further on this. Parfit concedes that it is not possible to specify precisely what degree counts as strong, and that therefore personal identity will be indeterminate in such cases. In the context of the current discussion, however, a detailed critique of Parfit's work is less relevant than an overall consideration of his general approach to persons and personal identity.

6. 'Prehension' is a key term and concept which Whitehead uses to refer to the way in which, in his inter-related view of reality, each occasion is said to feel or 'prehend' all of the occasions which preceded it (to varying degrees). It is thus the basis on which all reality is held to be interconnected, and the prehensive inheritance of each occasion from those occasions which preceded it forms the basis of the Whiteheadian understanding of cause and effect. It is based on the Latin verb 'prehendere,' meaning to grasp or to seize.

7. The dominant or presiding occasion is also sometimes referred to as the ruling, regnant or transcendent member or unit.

8. For Whitehead, while the dominant or “presiding” occasion is (probably) a single miniscule occasion, it “pervades” and controls the body through the complex “structure” of the bodily society.

... in an animal body the presiding occasion, if there be one, is the final node, or intersection, of a complex structure of many enduring objects. Such a structure pervades the human body (*PR* 109).

9. Lewis Ford in his essay “Inclusive Occasions” agrees that Cobb’s “compound” conception of occasions builds on Charles Hartshorne’s “Compound Individuals” (“Inclusive” 119). Ford offers his own account of ‘inclusive occasions’ which differs in its detail from Cobb’s. An in-depth analysis of the relative strengths and weaknesses of different conceptions of compound or inclusive occasions, however, lies outside the scope of my current discussion which is concerned with establishing an initial case for placing greater emphasis on the concept of the dominant occasion or dominating unit as a basis for understanding persons and personal identity.

10. The original reference for this phrase is “Compound” 57.

11. On a process understanding this temporal continuity is an asymmetrical and unidirectional progression, in which the past is fixed and given, but the future is creatively open and undetermined.

12. This is the “traditional dichotomy” to which Mingarelli refers.

Santos and Sia argue that Whitehead’s conception of personal identity overcomes the traditional dichotomy between a strict view, or ‘Ego theory,’ and a non-strict view, or ‘Bundle theory’ (Mingarelli 87).

Santos and Sia express the problem in terms of “substantialist” theories versus “empiricist” theories.

Substantialist theories grasp the center of unity but do not provide for an understanding of its inherent diversity save as an ineluctable unfolding of implicit contents. Empiricist theories, on the other hand, grasp the diversity but make little room for unity, thus ending up by attempting to show that there is no need to attribute the diverse states to anything. The truth of the matter must lie somewhere in between (Santos and Sia 65).

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