

Identity, Personal Identity, and the Self, by John Perry. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002, xiv + 264 pp.
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Anyone who has studied the topics listed in the title of this book will know the work of John Perry. The volume collects seven important papers from the 1970s and early 80s, along with four previously unpublished essays on similar themes and a substantial glossary. It is a welcome addition to an earlier collection of Perry's work (Perry 2000).

The first two essays, 'The Same F' and 'Relative Identity and Relative Number', defend the Fregean view that things are identical or distinct simpliciter against Geach's view that identity is always relative to a sort: that this thing and that one might be the same F or different Gs, but it is meaningless to say they are one or two without qualification. The final two pieces, both new, concern the semantics of first-person judgments, pursuing the theme of Perry's famous paper 'The Problem of the Essential Indexical' (included in Perry 2000). In between are a fascinating series of papers on the nature of identity over time in general and personal identity over time in particular. I will focus on these.

Perry's discussion of identity over time is based on the idea, derived from Carnap and Quine, that things identified at different times are identical just when the momentary 'stages' of those objects by which we identify them at those times stand in the appropriate unity relation (essays 3 and 5; see also Perry 1975). Suppose R is the unity relation for people: the relation things stand in just when they are stages of the same person. Then a person we identify at an earlier time is the same person as someone we identify at a later time if and only if the person-stage identified at the earlier time bears R to the person-stage identified at the later time. To ask under what circumstances people identified at different times are the same person is therefore to ask under what circumstances person-stages occurring at different times stand in R. Given all this, an account of what personal identity over time consists in will be an analysis of relation R.

Perry does not attempt to analyze R. He is more interested in its general logical features than in its specific content. But he assumes that it is a psychological relation: that two person-stages are R-related if, for instance, one contains a memory of an experience the other includes. He calls this assumption mentalism. Much of what he says about personal identity relies on it. He labours to defend it against the 18th-century charge of circularity (essay 5) and more recent attacks by Bernard Williams (essay 6). Essay 8 considers the relation between mentalism and the Parfitian view that our identity over time has no practical importance.

Perry's view of personal identity is most distinctive in its treatment of the fission puzzle. Suppose we accept mentalism: that what makes a past or future person me rather than someone else is his standing at that time in some psychological relation to me as I am now. Then we face the awkward fact that such a psychological relation could hold between one person at one time

and two people at another: let my cerebrum be divided and each half implanted into a different head. It seems to follow that in such a case I should be identical with the person who got the left half of my brain--'Lefty'--and I should also be identical with the person who got the right half, 'Righty'. But Lefty and Righty would not be identical with each other. So any account that makes a psychological relation sufficient for personal identity over time threatens to imply that one thing can be numerically identical with two things.

Nearly all mentalists respond to this problem in one of two ways. The first is the 'non-branching' view: neither Lefty nor Righty is me, precisely because they are two. What it takes for a future person to be me is for him to be the sole heir, then, of my current mental properties. The trouble with this is that (given mentalism) I could survive if half my brain were transplanted and the other half destroyed. So the non-branching view implies that whether I survive as the recipient of the left half of my brain depends on what happens to the right half: if the right half is destroyed, I survive; if it is preserved, I perish. Most of us find this hard to believe. As Parfit once put it, how could a double success be a failure?

The second response, championed by Lewis (1976), has been called the 'multiple-occupancy view': both Lefty and Righty exist, in exactly the same place, before the operation. I am both people in the sense that there are two of me, so to speak, all along: what appears to be one pre-fission person is in fact two precisely overlapping and exactly similar people. This too is (putting it mildly) hard to believe.

Perry's account (first published some years before Lewis's) is a different version of the multiple-occupancy view. He says that there are three people in the fission story. There are Lefty and Righty, as before, but also a third person with a Y-shaped career comprising both Lefty's and Righty's stages. Call him 'Branchy'. This may sound absurd: if two overlapping people are already too many, why add yet another? The reason is that this third man plays a role in Perry's account of the semantics of 'person-talk'--of sentences of the form 'Lefty is F at t'. This account is central to Perry's view of personal identity. Though its details (found in essay 3) are complex and resist compression, I will try to give the reader a sense of how it goes.

The main idea is that when we talk about the people in a particular situation, our language latches onto some of them and ignores others. And which people we refer to and which we ignore depends not only on their situation, but also on ours. In particular, if we speak before the fission operation, the only person in the story we can refer to is Branchy. We cannot then refer to Lefty or to Righty--or at least we can't refer to them with any ordinary expression such as 'Lefty' or 'the person who will end up with the left half of Olson's brain'. So if we say before the operation (in an otherwise ordinary context) that there is just one person there, we say something true, for only one person in the story falls within the scope of the quantifiers we employ in ordinary speech at that time. And we can say, truly, that this one person will survive

the operation with the left half of his brain and go off to the left. We can also say truly that he will survive the operation with the right half of his brain and go off to the right. (But Perry's semantics forbid us to infer from this that he will go both left and right.) If we speak after the operation, by contrast, we cannot refer to Branchy. But we can refer then to Lefty and Righty. So after the operation we can say, truly, that there are two people in the story, and furthermore that there were two people there all along.

No person comes into being or perishes in the course of the fission story. But the answer to the ordinary question, How many people are there in the story? varies depending on when we ask it. Or rather, the sentence 'How many people are there?' expresses a different question depending on when we utter it: if we utter it before the fission, we ask how many people there are of Branchy's sort (answer: one); if we utter it afterwards, we ask how many people there are of Lefty's and Righty's sort (answer: two). It is only the philosopher's question, 'How many people are there in the story at any time?' to which the answer is three. But that, Perry thinks, is not a question that ordinarily concerns us, and so the surprising answer to it does not contradict any ordinary belief.

This view makes much of what we want to say about the fission case come out true. We want to say that I shall survive the operation with the left half of my brain. That is because the man who gets that organ will inherit my mental features in a way that we want to say would ensure my survival in non-fission cases, and we don't think that the mere existence of a rival heir could prevent me from surviving. For the same reason, we want to say that I shall survive the operation with the right half of my brain. Naturally we also want to say that the man who gets the left half of my brain is not the one who gets the right half. And we want to say that there is only one person in the story before the operation. Perry's view enables us to say all of this, without implying that one thing can be identical with two things.

No other view has this advantage. According to the non-branching view, I can't survive fission at all--though I could survive an otherwise-identical 'one-sided' operation. And Lewis's view implies that any statement made about someone who is going to divide will refer ambiguously to at least two people. In that case I cannot say truly that I shall survive the operation with the left half of my brain. That would be at most half right, for although one of the referents of my 'I', Lefty, will survive with the left half of my brain, another referent, Righty, will not. Nor can I truly say that I shall survive with the right half of my brain and have Righty's fate, for again my 'I' refers to Lefty as well as to Righty. And the claim that I shall survive with both halves is just plain false, for none of the referents of 'I' gets both halves.

This Lewisian view is unsettling. I want to know what will happen to me when I am divided. Shall I have Lefty's fate, or Righty's? For Lewis, this urgent question has no answer, for it rests on the false presupposition that my first-person thoughts refer to only one person.

Asking what will happen to me is like asking about the planet between the earth and the sun. More precisely, the thought, What will happen to me? ambiguously expresses two questions: What will happen to Lefty? and, What will happen to Righty?. But neither of these is the question I want answered. I can know what will happen to Lefty and to Righty--the only people in the story, according to Lewis--without knowing what will happen to me. The question I want to ask simply doesn't exist. Perry's view has the virtue of implying that there is such a question, and that it has a definite answer: I shall have Lefty's fate, and also Righty's. It is a strange answer--but then fission is a strange case.

There is a great deal to say about all of this. Let me make just one point: Perry's view of personal identity, like Lewis's, implies that people are composed of temporal parts. Although Perry himself is happy with an ontology of temporal parts, he seems to think, at least in the earlier essays, that his view is neutral on this issue. Those who doubt whether people have temporal parts, he says, can take the 'person-stages' he speaks of to be temporal parts of the event that is a person's history, rather than temporal parts of a person (38; see also Perry 1975: 10). But it is hard to see how that is compatible with his view about fission.

Perry says (speaking in the atemporal idiom of the metaphysician) that there are three people writing this review if there is fission in my future and only one if there is not. How could the number of people there are now depend on what happens later? It isn't that later states of affairs cause earlier ones. The usual answer to this question begins by saying that a person is composed of temporal parts: that a person is, say, a thing composed of person-stages, one of which bears R to all and only the others. In that case, the number of people writing this review now is the number of people who have this current writing stage as a temporal part. And that number depends on what happens at other times: it is a part of at least three such beings if it is R-related to a later stage that divides (or to an earlier stage that fuses) and a part of just one otherwise. If people have temporal parts, then the number of people here now depends on how things are at other times in much the same way as the number of railway lines of which a local section of track is a spatial part depends on how things are at other places. If people don't have temporal parts, this story is unavailable, and Perry's view looks mysterious at best. That is one reason why all other advocates of the multiple-occupancy view that I know of say that we have temporal parts.

Another is that it is hard to describe Branchy consistently if he lacks temporal parts. He will have incompatible properties along his post-fission branches: Lefty might be hairy after the operation while Righty is bald. Then Branchy will be hairy at that time insofar as Lefty is hairy, and hairless insofar as Righty is bald. (Perry's semantics prevents us from saying in ordinary language that Branchy is both hairy and bald; but it is nonetheless true.) How can something be both hairy and not hairy at once? The most obvious answer is that it can have both a hairy part and a hairless one. But on that story Lefty's hairy stages and Righty's bald

ones must be parts of Branchy, and not merely parts of his history.

For that matter, Perry's view implies that people have such temporary properties as thinking and writing by virtue of their stages' having them (50). In that case person-stages must be capable of thinking and writing. And it is hard to see how parts of my history--mere events--could think or write. My thinking stages would have to be temporal parts of me.

Perry says a great many things about identity over time that make perfect sense against the background of a temporal-parts ontology but are outrageous otherwise. This matters because the ontology of temporal parts--better known as 'four-dimensionalism'--is a contentious metaphysical claim. Many reputable philosophers doubt whether we or any other persisting objects have temporal parts. They will be unable to accept Perry's view of personal identity, or his proposed solution to the fission puzzle, or, I would argue, his Quinean view of identity over time in general. So we should expect Perry to give us some reason to accept four-dimensionalism (as Lewis does). It is odd that he sees no need to do so.

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