PERSONAL IDENTITY AND EXTRINSICNESS

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I

On one familiar view of personal identity over time the continued existence of a person over time admits of analysis in terms of relations of non-branching physical and/or psychological continuity. The need for a non-branching or no-competitors clause is occasioned by the most plausible description of the division of persons (a situation in which one individual stands to two later individuals in qualitatively identical relations of physical and psychological continuity). The inclusion of such a clause is necessary in order to avoid the consequence that the original person in a case of division is identical to both resulting persons.

The inclusion in such theories of personal identity over time of a non-branching requirement has been thought to incur the charge of absurdity. The charge can be pressed as follows: any theory of personal identity which incorporates a non-branching requirement violates a necessary constraint which governs our concept of strict numerical identity and — absurdly — implies, in a sense to be characterised, that the identity of a person over time can be extrinsically determined. Hence, no best-candidate theory of personal identity over time, which incorporates a non-branching component, is tenable.

If so, it follows that we must either redescribe the transtemporal identities which hold in a case of division, eg. along the lines suggested by Lewis, Perry and Noonan (according to which the distinct post-division persons both occupy the single pre-division body), or else give up entirely the attempt to analyse the identity of a person over time in terms of physical and/or psychological continuities (and embrace instead eg. some version of Cartesian dualism). However, my aim in this paper is to show how the commitment to the extrinsicness of identity on the part of best-candidate theories can be accepted without absurdity.
II

First, however, I shall consider the question of whether division really is a genuine metaphysical possibility for persons. If it is not, there is no need for the inclusion of a non-branching component in the analysis of a person’s identity over time, and commitment to the extrinsicness of personal identity is thereby avoided.

David Wiggins has argued that the division of persons is not genuinely possible: although we can describe cases of division at a purely causal level, in terms of movement of organic matter etc., division is not a metaphysical possibility for persons. Despite appearances to the contrary, the concept person loses all application in such a situation.

Prima facie, this is a desperately implausible position. Nothing in our concept of a person appears to exclude imaginary dividing creatures – apparently like us in all the psychological respects that make for personhood – from the category of persons. Yet Wiggins is forced to say that such creatures, though epistemic counterparts of persons, are not themselves persons.

However, Wiggins would concede that nothing in our concept of a person excludes the possibility of division – the impossibility of the division of persons may be a truth which no amount a priori reflection can reveal. It is, rather, a consequence of the – purported – fact that the concept person is a natural kind concept (ie., in effect, the thesis that all persons are animals) combined with an essentialist view of natural kinds, delivering up a posteriori necessities of the sort associated with Kripke and Putnam.

If this combination of views is correct, then:

... the sense of the sortal predicate ‘person’ will exempt us from counting as genuinely conceivable any narrative in which persons undergo changes that violate the law-like regularities constituting the actual nomological foundations for the delimitation of the kind we denominate as that of persons.

Thus: if ‘person’ is a natural kind concept (ie. if Wiggins is correct to incorporate animalhood in his theory of persons), certain laws of development, which may exclude the possibility of division, will be a posteriori essential to persons, in much the same way that eg. having its actual internal structure, is a posteriori essential to gold.

Wiggins’ argument has the following two premises: first, that person is a