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AFFECT, AGENCY, AND ENGAGEMENT: *Conceptions of the Person in Philosophy, Neuropsychiatry, and Psychotherapy*

PETER BINNS

ABSTRACT: This paper is a critical account, centered on the views of a contemporary analytic philosopher, Derek Parfit, of concepts of the person which reduce personal processes to the mental contents that they contain. It is argued that (1) the "split-brain" thought experiments that Parfit sees as undermining the unity of the person in fact only reveal some nonpathological divisions in its executive functions; (2) the reductionist analysis that Parfit offers fails to take account of the socially constituted dimension of personal life, producing a one-sidedly psychologistic analysis; (3) even within the realm of the psychological, this analysis fails to capture a central feature of personal processes: their modes of engagement between self and environment; and (4) this is revealed through an examination of Korsakoff's syndrome patients, some of whom would satisfy Parfit's criteria for personhood while lacking some of its essential features, such as the ownership of experiences and the narrativization of a personal history. Rather, it is argued, drawing on accounts of person formation in Freud and in object relations theory, (1) it is only after mental contents have been owned (and not disowned) that they appear within the boundary of the psyche in the first place; and (2) this process of person formation and person maintenance is diagnosed as requiring that life have an affective dimension that is not reducible to purely cognitive operations.

KEYWORDS: person, split brain, reductionism, Korsakoff's syndrome, Parfit, Freud, object relations theory, affect, agency

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WHAT SORTS OF THINGS can appropriately be thought of as having the status of "agents," "selves," and "persons," and what are the circumstances—real or imaginary—in which it would be appropriate to withhold such statuses from a human being, an artifact, or an alien? These are questions that philosophers have wrestled with for some time. So too have psychotherapists and psychologists, but within a rather different and broader context. In this paper I shall be arguing that these interdisciplinary differences are unfortunate, and in particular that the psychological and psychotherapeutic context is of special *philosophical* interest, providing a background for a critique of cognitivist and dualist approaches to the philosophy of mind.

The psychological and psychotherapeutic context has this particular significance because there is no very obvious a priori answer to quite fundamental philosophical questions about persons. Moreover, when there does seem to be such an answer, more often than not it needs to be substantially revised in the light of subsequent psychological and psychotherapeutic experience. One example of the latter is over what is required for the existence and continuity of the identity of

a given person through time: since Hume, philosophers have frequently worked on the assumption that this is essentially about the sort of coherence and continuity of the ideas and sensory data that the person *has*. But this approach assimilates personal process to mental contents and ignores the presence or absence of the process of ownership of items within the field of mental contents, and it is here that the psychological and psychotherapeutic material has a major role to play.

In this paper I shall be examining these themes through the views of a contemporary philosopher in this broadly Humean tradition—Derek Parfit—whose views, set out in a recent work, *Reasons and Persons* (Parfit 1984), have defined the terms of reference of much current philosophical discussion on the matter within the analytic tradition. I shall be arguing that he approaches the question from an inappropriate direction and that persons are affect processors as much as they are cognition processors; that they are agents as much as they are recipients of information; and that they have an engaged mode of being as much as they have a detached mode of being in the world. In fact, I shall be arguing that for an adequate conception of persons to be achieved, it is the affective, agentlike, engaged mode of being that is of primary importance, not the cognitive, information-receiving, detached mode of being.

PARFIT'S *REASONS AND PERSONS*

Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* is a sustained defense of what he refers to as the "reductionist" position on persons. Reductionism is the view that what fundamentally matters for us with regard to our conception of ourselves is the psychological connectedness and continuity of past and future mental states with current ones. It denies what the antireductionist asserts, namely that what constitutes the essence of my personal identity is some further "deep fact" about me rather than this connectedness and continuity, and it therefore tends to assimilate the identity of persons to the identity of nations over time. So, for instance, the question of whether Germany is currently the same nation as it was in 1890, 1920, or 1950 is a matter of degree, and so too is it a matter of degree whether I am the same person in 1992 as I was in 1972 or 1952.

Parfit places much weight on a series of thought experiments. Thus we have teletransportation cases in which my body is scanned molecule by molecule in one place and simultaneously destroyed and replicated on a distant planet, the supposition being that the new body, my double, would appear replete with all "my" memories and psychological characteristics.[1] By using such examples Parfit seems to want to do two things: to convince us that we have a more contingent relationship with our bodies than some of us might suppose; and to try to show us that there are a number of hypothetical cases in which there just is no intuitively certain and obvious answer to the question "Is this the same person as me, or not?" Underlying both of these themes is the thesis that persons are, as Hume also believed them to be, nothing more than bundles of perceptions and memories united by a continuity and connectedness between them.

More interesting, because they are inherently more physically possible, are what Parfit refers to as "split-brain" thought experiments. These are not really thought experiments at all because much of this material can be examined in the light of actual experiments or the results of current or past surgical practice. In the case of certain epileptics, for example, it was found that seizures were amplified by the passing of signals from one cerebral hemisphere to the other via the corpus callosum. In some extreme cases the corpus callosum was therefore sectioned, preventing direct communication between one

[1] Parfit is part of a long tradition in which philosophers, particularly in the analytic tradition, have shown considerable ingenuity with thought experiments in this area. Some of Parfit's thought experiments include cases in which my double and I overlap for a period of time and can converse with each other, or in which my double is only created after some time has elapsed, or when more than one double is created. Other thought experiments include series-persons (e.g., annually renewable body replacements) and fused persons (in which one person is the "resultant" of the personal characteristics of two persons: Parfit, for instance, imagines a fusion of a convinced conservative and a convinced socialist yielding a person who is a floating voter). Some philosophers have argued, however, that the method of thought experiments may be heuristically unsound, pointing instead to the rich variety of "real" experiments represented by human experience, including that of psychopathology (see especially Wilkes 1988).

hemisphere and the other (but permitting each hemisphere to have access upward to the perceptual world and downward to the brain stem). This had the incidental effect that each hemisphere was now able to carry on simultaneously quite different executive functions, and in another thought experiment ("my physics exam"), Parfit imagines being able to give two alternative methods of solving a problem in physics to such a person, who would apply the two methods simultaneously, one in each hemisphere. When Parfit surmises that in such a case there are two separated streams of consciousness, it is difficult to disagree with him.

Parfit argues further that if these separate streams are kept apart, the antireductionist faces a major problem in deciding which one of them, if either, is to be identified as the real me. Stream A has just as much plausibility as, but no more plausibility than, stream B as the repository of the real me, but if there is just one real me, only one of these streams may be chosen. Worse still is the choice of neither, for then who I am will be defined in terms that exclude consciousness, choice, and rational thinking altogether. So, to use another thought experiment that Parfit cites, if I am such a corpus callosum—sectioned individual and am also a terminally ill identical triplet with two brain-dead brothers, each of whom receives one-half of my brain in a subsequent brain transplant operation, I have good reasons to prefer this outcome to simple death; I have no good reasons for thinking that the "real me" is A and not B (or vice versa), and every good reason for thinking that personal identity is a matter of the extent of the psychological continuities and connectednesses that exist between "me-here-and-now" and each of the other two triplets' future mental states, rather than being a separate, indivisible thing altogether. Parfit's conclusion, then, is that personal identity is a matter of degree; so, if we henceforth define the C-likeness of an organism in terms of its possession of an adequate measure of psychological continuity and connectedness, persons are then essentially C-like beings. The antireductionist, however, insists that they have some quality on top of that, whatever that quality (henceforth referred to as P-likeness) may be.

SELF AND OTHERS

One set of examples which might at first sight fit Parfit's analysis is that of more collective forms of the self. Thus, though individual selves may play a game of football, only collective selves in the form of teams can win or lose these games. A similar story can be told for corporations and their profits, losses, mission statements, policies, and so on, and for a whole range of other collective activities that are institutionalized in social activity of one kind or another. In one way this looks like just more grist to Parfit's mill; in his view we ought to see persons rather more in the way we see such things as nations, in which "sameness" is not absolute but is a matter of degree: we call it the same team, but really we know that such a statement is largely fictional if everything about the team—players, managers, stadium, opponents—has changed over time.

On closer examination, however, the matter is not so simple. Many of these socially institutionalized collectives do in fact have "essences" that are distinctly more P-like than they are C-like. Many of them have these essences guarded by a whole phalanx of lawyers specializing in company law and the like, the whole purpose of which is to give definitive "yes" or "no" answers to such questions as "Is this the same company as the one that took on such-and-such a debt in 1962?" In the law schools the students may struggle with particularly thorny questions such as how to determine when a company has placed itself on the borderline between existence and nonexistence, but no one doubts that when it comes to it a solution based on existing precedent will be found to the problem, or, failing that, that a solution will be created by fiat by the appropriate legal authority. So, for all legally constituted collective institutions there are boundaries that determine what is included within the institutions and what is not. These boundaries may be absolute and thus may not admit of degrees. The boundaries, driven as they are by historically changing social forces, may undergo a change in position over time, but this does not mean that they are diffuse or vague in the way in which they operate on different occasions: diachronic variation is quite compatible with synchronic determinateness.

Of course, it is always possible to argue that these social institutions—corporations, nations, sports clubs, and so on—possess these features only because they have been modeled by the law (or other social practices) on persons, and if persons have been misconceived as P-like rather than C-like, as Parfit maintains, it is to be expected that this error will be sedimented in some social, institutionalized forms such as the ones we have mentioned above.

This reply may well give a plausible account of the origin of many social institutions, but quite contrary conclusions can also be drawn from it. Let us grant for the sake of argument that such socially institutionalized entities have indeed been modeled on a preconception of what persons are, and that this preconception falsely makes personhood contingent on P-like rather than C-like characteristics. We then have two sorts of structures of activity within which people standardly find themselves acting as agents. Firstly, as individuals, they really are C-like, though for the most part (Parfit and other reductionists excepted) they continue to falsely conceive themselves as P-like. Secondly, as players of roles in appropriately constituted organizations, they really are P-like, and they also correctly conceive of themselves as P-like.

So, whereas P-likeness starts off by being a simple error about us with regard to our individual life, it ends up by being incorporated as a real feature of us with regard to our life in various socially institutionalized entities. In other words, our conception of ourselves as agents begins to enter into a part of what we really are as agents.

Why stop there, however? The same social institutions that act as guarantors of the P-like status of entities such as companies, football teams, and the like do not confine their activities to collective life. The law holds me responsible for my past actions as an individual in just the same P-like manner as it does my company for its past actions. If the P-like legal status of companies is based on the legal status of persons, then a fortiori the legal status of persons must be P-like too. It might of course be argued that whereas companies, for instance, are nothing more than socially institutionalized entities and therefore possess nothing other than a P-like essence, persons most certainly are not socially institutionalized entities. Persons, so it might be argued, are natural organisms that create societies and social institutions, and so it is a mistake to assume that what they are is defined by these institutions; in reality it is the other way around.

Something like this view seems to inform Parfit's analysis; all his arguments and examples are based on the consideration of human agents abstracted from networks of social relationships, so we can only assume that he believes that such networks add little to the concept of the person. But is this plausible? How far can we abstract persons from their social nexus while still holding onto a notion of personhood that retains a sufficient quantity of recognizably *personal* features? This raises issues that go beyond the scope of this paper, but before we move on to other topics one or two brief problems should be mentioned.

Parfit clearly believes that the problem with which he is dealing is the problem of the concept of a person in general, and within it the question of the identity of persons over time. But there are good grounds for asserting that what he is really referring to is the question of the identity of a given *psychological organism* over time, and that this is by no means identical with personal identity. Persons, by contrast, are of necessity more complex than that. To use one metaphor, persons are multifaceted agencies that are embodied in specific biological, historical, social, ecological, and psychological forms (we might want to add further forms to this list: linguistic, spiritual, economic, etc.). It would then be a mistake to identify the essence of persons, as Parfit does, within just one of these areas—the psychological—and ignore the rest altogether.

Many other authors have, in contrast to the Parfitian viewpoint, argued that the concept of the self cannot be reduced to narrowly psychological factors. Three such authors who present cases for Parfit to answer are Hegel, with his view of a historically constituted self (Hegel 1964); Merleau-Ponty, with his conception of a bodily-rooted self (Merleau-Ponty 1962); and Goffman, with his socially based role-performance theory of the self (Goffman 1971). These various avenues, though providing fruitful alter-

natives to Parfit's own psychological approach, go beyond the scope of the present paper. Accordingly, I shall confine myself to an examination of the psychological criterion itself. In particular, I am interested in the light that empirical work in this area may throw on the philosophical analysis that Parfit has given us, and it is this to which I now turn.

EMOTIONS, AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE SELF

It is clear from Parfit's account that for him the essence of personhood—or, to use his terminology, "what fundamentally matters about persons"[2]—is given by the psychological criterion of C-likeness. In this section I want to criticize this viewpoint by drawing on empirical material that suggests not only that it is too narrow but also that it may be going in the wrong direction altogether. The problem is revealed most clearly in Parfit's analysis of the "split-brain" cases, in which, according to him, the actual functional separation of the understanding implies that persons are "rivers with divided streams" (Parfit 1984, 246), and that if these streams are permanently separated anatomically (as for instance in the brain-transplant thought experiments), you then have two persons with equal claims to be the person from whom the brain halves came.

Let us look at these cases in more detail. They are not really cases of split *brains,* because the whole area of the old brain—the brain stem, including the hippocampus, the amygdala, and so forth; that is, the so-called reptilian brain and the paleomammalian brain—has not been, and cannot be, so divided. Why then refer to these cases as involving "split brains" rather than "separated cerebral hemispheres"? No doubt the lower part of the brain is not considered very important by Parfit; but there is strong evidence that it is crucially important in the area in question, namely, the part of experience and the quality of experience through which organisms acquire and retain a sense of identity and selfhood. The paleomammalian area includes the limbic system, which seems to play a very large role—perhaps a predominant one—in our emotional and affective life, including motivation and feeling. The area of the brain stem around the striatal complex is also thought to be where the basic patterns of species-characteristic behavior originate from: these patterns include the underlying forms for such things as foraging, predatory behavior, mating, infant rearing, and so on, which later on take on a more concrete form through the addition of the perceptual and executive functions of the higher parts of the brain (Maclean 1987). If these generally accepted conclusions are correct, the cerebral hemispheres have relatively the least to do with our conceptions of self-identity, our feelings of being "at home" in our bodies and in the world, and so on, but contain rather more in the way of specialized functions relating to perception and the management of action—the areas that seem the furthest from such notions of self-identity.

It is curious, then, that Parfit should have placed such weight on what appears to be the part of neuroanatomy least suited to being connected with the psychological experience and feelings of self-identity. Why does he do so? He seems to have two positions that he variously wants to defend:

1. The Humean view that persons are not agents but just bundles of perceptions. In that case, what the "split-brain" thought experiments show is not that two persons are present but rather that "the number of the persons involved is none" (Parfit 1987, 20).
2. A pragmatic theory about "what matters." Here one has to assume that there are indeed real agents in the world, that they have aims and projects, and that thinking about these can yield ethically significant conclusions.

Clearly, position 1 is used in his analysis of the "split-brain" cases, and position 2 is used when he applies his theory of persons and personal identity to the consideration of ethics. With regard to the latter he draws on his reductionist analysis of persons to criticize the view that we ought to pursue purely self-interested goals and projects; if persons are C-like rather than P-like,

[2] Formulating the question in terms of "what fundamentally matters about people" conflates a number of issues—for instance, the concept of a person, that of personal identity, that of agency, and that of the self. A fascinating exploration of some of these and other problems in this area of the philosophy of mind is given in Hofstadter and Dennett 1981, and in Dennett 1993.

there will be only varying *degrees* of linkage between a consciousness that is currently present and some future consciousness with which it is supposed to be associated (and perhaps also some degrees of linkage with other future consciousnesses), and therefore purely self-regarding goals and projects are incoherent. This inclines Parfit to argue that some form of limited altruism is a logical requirement for the having of goals and projects, and thus to replace self-interest with critical present aims theory (CP theory), in which current aims and projects are endorsed but at the same time refused any necessary link with a unique future subject of consciousness (Parfit 1984, 445). The details of this argument need not detain us here; the important point is that (1), above, implies that persons are essentially passive recipients of informational data, whereas (2) implies that they have an essentially active, intentional relationship with the world. But is it plausible to assent to both simultaneously? Parfit tries to solve the problem by modifying (1) as follows:

> In a sense a Bundle Theorist denies the existence of persons. An outright denial is of course absurd. As Reid protested in the eighteenth century, "I am not thought, I am not action, I am not feeling; I am something which thinks and acts and feels." I am not a series of events, but a person. A Bundle Theorist admits this fact, but claims it to be only a fact about our grammar, or our language. There are persons or subjects in this language-dependent way. If, however, persons are believed to be more than this—to be separately existing things, distinct from our brains and bodies, and the various kinds of mental states and events—the Bundle Theorist denies that there are such things. (Parfit 1987, 20)

This would appear to be a plea to us to think of ourselves as agents rather than Humean bundles; however, the difference between agents and bundles is not at all merely a matter of linguistic rewrapping, as Parfit suggests, but is rather a very profound question of whether the basic relationship to the world is one of engagement or of detachment. There is a fundamental difference in these two modes of being. The world of engagement and agency is inconceivable without the agent's being rooted in the kind of functions that have been seen as characterizing brain-stem functions. Persons (in the nonreductionist account of them) and agents (in the minimalist sense required by CP theory) both presuppose this engaged mode of being in the world, whereas Humean bundles do not. This would suggest an ambiguity implicit in Parfit's account: so far we have seen the distinction between reductionists and nonreductionists in terms of whether they accept that the self is P-like (nonreductionists) or C-like (reductionists); but this distinction would only be relevant if Parfit were to accept the unreconstructed Humean bundle theory, which he explicitly rejects. In the "split-brain" thought experiments cited above, C-likeness is, so we are told, what the stream of understanding within each of the divided cerebral hemispheres can claim independently for itself; but this would not be sufficient to give the streams the status of agents. Such streams of consciousness only become streams of consciousness of a *person* or an *agent* if they constitute modes of engagement between agency and environment—which seems to be exactly what a reductionist such as Parfit seeks to deny.[3]

A major problem with using C-likeness as a criterion for the minimalist account of agency is that it conflates agentlike—or personal—processes with the totality of the mental or psychological contents that are available for subjective awareness. As will become clear, it is impossible to gain an adequate understanding of what is involved in even the most minimal account of agency without a clear distinction between the two. Part of the problem with C-likeness is its indifference, as a criterion, to qualitatively different types of continuities and connectednesses that exist within people's subjective awarenesses. Certain clinical cases reveal these differences in a stark form, and it is to this that we now turn.

AFFECT, AGENCY, AND MEMORY LOSS

As far as I am aware, William James (1890) was the first to propose a distinction between two

[3] There are some interesting points of contact between the argument presented here and the work of philosophers and psychologists in less mainstream parts of the Anglo-American tradition and in the Continental tradition; in particular, Heidegger (1968), Merleau-Ponty (1968), Gibson (1979), and Piaget, who writes: "Intelligence begins neither with knowledge of the self nor of things as such but with knowledge of their interaction, and it is by orienting itself simultaneously toward the two poles of that interaction that intelligence organises the world by organising itself" (Piaget 1955, 354–55).

sorts of information storage and retrieval systems in the human mind, one of which places the information in a detached, factual form and the other of which organizes it autobiographically, purely in relationship to the self. This is not the same as Russell's distinction between acquaintance and "knowledge about" (Russell 1912), or Nagel's distinction between objective and subjective modes of discourse (Nagel 1986), because both of these latter distinctions presuppose relatively well-formed concepts of the self. The most striking need for such a distinction is made clear by patients suffering from certain forms of amnesia, including Korsakoff's syndrome. Individuals with the latter disorder seem to have no problem with registering, storing, and retrieving information of an impersonal character in a propositional manner but are almost completely unable to store and retrieve information autobiographically, or in ways that connect with the self as agent (whether as an actor or as a spectator at an event).

Some of the clinical evidence yields some very interesting results. In 1911 Claparède reported the details of the case of a woman suffering from Korsakoff's syndrome (Claparède 1951; Eagle 1988). A few minutes after he pricked her hand with a pin hidden between his fingers she no longer remembered the incident. But when Claparède then tried shaking her hand again, she withdrew it. Asked why she had done so, she replied, "[D]oesn't one have the right to withdraw one's hand?" and then, when pressed further, "[I]s there perhaps a pin hidden in your hand?" Asked why she suspected this, she merely replied, "That was an idea that went through my mind...sometimes pins are hidden in people's hands." When read items from a newspaper she remembered nothing, not even that she had been read to, but questioning revealed that she had retained some of the contents of these items, though she experienced her knowledge of them not as a memory but, as it were, just as an idea she had "without knowing why," or as "something that went though my mind" (Eagle 1988, 95).

Since then there have been a large number of similar cases reported, and this has led Tulving and some other thinkers to postulate a functional separation between two kinds of memory, an episodic memory in which the rememberer features as actor or observer, and which is characterized by a spatiotemporal framework connecting the self with the events in a personal manner, and a semantic memory in which there are no events or personal involvement, but there are instead propositions, concepts, ideas, and facts that are not subsumed under a temporal order (Eagle 1988). Other thinkers, working in the area of neuroanatomy, have cited evidence that strongly suggests that this functional separation has a structural basis, in that Korsakoff's syndrome patients seem, uniquely, to suffer from the degeneration of cells in the mammillary bodies of the brain stem (Sacks 1986).

What this suggests is that Korsakoff's syndrome patients do not necessarily lack parts of their previous experience, and that this experience is not necessarily unavailable to them—in some form or another—in the present. Therefore there is a sense in which they would seem to pass the Parfitian test for C-likeness, in that: (1) there is mental continuity (e.g., the facts contained in the previously told newspaper stories do remain accessible in the present in one way or another); and (2) there is mental connectedness (e.g., in the way in which the experience of the pinprick causes the present experience of caution and fear). In this respect, those who suffer from the syndrome are sometimes more C-like than are some of those who suffer from even quite mild forms of senile dementia, for example, to whom no one would wish to deny the status of personhood. Yet many authors would contest the claim that some Korsakoff's syndrome patients, those suffering from particularly severe impairments, were persons, the loss of the whole of a person's self-involvement in the past often being cited as justifying this claim. For example, William, one of the Korsakoff's syndrome patients referred to by Oliver Sacks (1986, 93), is thus diagnosed by him as in one sense "desouled" on account of this dysfunction. This suggests that C-likeness could account for semantic memory but that only something further—which would imply P-likeness—could account for the episodic memory necessary for a human being to be a full person.

A further problem is encountered with respect to the question of time. A subject could be C-like

without itself possessing the concept of time: it suffices that there be a psychological connectedness and continuity for the subject, without the subject's having to be aware of it or able to carry out the task of temporally ordering experiences more generally; and this, no doubt, is a major problem with respect to the status of some Korsakoff's syndrome patients as persons. This also points, once again, to the inadequacy of C-likeness for the development of agent-based views of the person. To have aims it is necessary, as we have seen already, for there to be agents, but it is also necessary for those agents to be able to project into the future, and this is another feature lacking in subjects with a deeply impaired notion of time.

This argument can be generalized to the past as well, in that for a person to have had, in the past, aims that in some way or another resulted in present experience, autobiographical narratives similar to those needed for future aims will also be required. Contextualized meanings within a narrative discourse thus form the starting point for intentionalized, engaged modes of being in the world, as indeed hermeneutic theorists have argued, in particular Gadamer (1975), Habermas (1974), and Ricoeur (1981). But as we have seen, there is evidence to suggest that temporality is directly connected both structurally and functionally with episodic experience, and therefore with P-likeness. If, therefore, CP theory is to be defended for a community of C-like, rather than P-like, subjects, a way will have to be found to add on temporality to C-likeness. It is not clear how this might be done.

AFFECTIVITY AND PERSONS IN PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC CONTEXTS

Underlying cases such as those of Korsakoff's syndrome patients is a general feature of experience to which it is worth drawing attention. If we define experience broadly, so as to include the whole of the mental contents that are experienced in any way at all by an organism, this notion of experience clearly includes far more than merely the experiences that can be connected with the organism's conception of itself. If we refer to the first as mental contents and the second as personalized experience, we may note that the two are not coextensive and that there may be many items in the former category (mental contents) which have no direct connection with selfhood at all; furthermore, it is the existence of this distinction that lies at the bottom of the understanding of the Korsakoff's syndrome patients and also reveals the conflation that seems to be built into Parfit's linking of C-likeness to the concept of a person. It is also important to note that this distinction is not just a helpful device for understanding cases of severe psychological disorders; it can be usefully extended to other areas as well.

One example of an area in which it can be used is the psychoanalytic theory of repression. According to the structural model of the psyche which Freud developed in his paper "The Ego and the Id" (Freud 1984), repression consists of an activity of disownership by the ego, which expels certain mental contents from an "I" status to an "it" status. Thus, a given mental content is no longer experienced as something that I am having or doing; rather, it is experienced as something that is happening to me. On occasions this may take on a more pathological form in which an item such as a desire is no longer experienced as such but is transformed into a symptomatic trait of one kind or another, such as an obsession or a paralysis of a part of the body. Characteristically, the therapeutic process will then consist of a reexamination of this psychical activity: it may be that the alienation of the mental content to a "not-me" status is because the alternative, really owning it, might lead to the need to accept that my self includes all kinds of mental contents that run counter to various moral codes, and accepting a "not-me" is easier than living with a "bad-me." In the case of neurosis, the assumption is that this process of disownership, however rational it may have been at the time of its infantile origins, no longer represents a sound policy for the adult, and that owning the repressed mental content will therefore lead to enhanced contact with the world and a more fulfilling life for the individual involved.

This perspective would suggest two further conclusions: (1) the boundary between these two sorts of mental contents, the ego-syntonic and

the ego-alien, is not fixed; (2) what shifts the given mental content from one category to the other is not predetermined by the qualitative nature of the experience in itself, abstracted from the relationship to the person having it, but rather, the shift occurs as a result of this person's *activity:* the making of certain choices rather than other ones. If (2) is the case, we can now note a further problem that would seem to be endemic in all attempts to define persons on the basis of their mental contents. Only some mental contents—that is, those that are ego-syntonic—could serve as such a basis, but they only acquire such a characteristic after the ego has already acted so as to own them; ego-syntonic mental contents therefore *presuppose* the ego and thus cannot be used as independent parameters for creating it in the first place.

This applies not just to neurotics; all people, according to Freud, go through comparable processes of ego formation. For Freud the ego is not something that is given but something that is created by the emerging self through a process in which the desire for certain objects is given up and replaced with the desire for, inter alia, a certain self-image. In this formative process an elemental self-activity appears as a precondition for the sorting out of mental contents into the ego-syntonic and the ego-alien. Again, the self as agent appears prior to the appearance of ego-syntonic mental contents, and thus is not to be seen simply as a product of them. The boundary between the two is not fixed but is continually open to change, and personal development or growth consists not just in the expansion of the ego-syntonic within the field of mental contents but also in the expulsion of previously introjected material (for instance, material from the personal superego).

Freud's is not the only viewpoint that denies mental contents a priority over agency; many other psychotherapeutic theories do so still more emphatically. Object relations theory, for instance, asserts that the concept of self—and the subsequent separation of mental contents from the rest of the world—can only begin to be formed after the emerging young person has gone through an initial process of attachment to the mother, followed by a subsequent detachment from her (Bowlby 1958; Hundert 1990; Winnicott 1958). The latter part of the process is constituted by the emergence of the boundary defining the self and cannot be achieved without the emerging young person's experiencing the affective side of boundary formation. The latter includes both having the feelings involved (the pain of maternal separation) and being able to process their meaning (mother is separate from self). This view suggests that the concept of self can only be formed as a result of the emergence of a properly functioning feeling-processing faculty, and the use of this faculty to create a boundary containing the self. Hence there is some, as it were, primal feeling or agency work to be done before the ontogenetically primordial experiential flux can have anything like mental contents condensed out of it. It follows, a fortiori, that mental contents cannot themselves be the independent building blocks out of which agency can be created.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been argued in this paper that there are major problems encountered by philosophical accounts of the person in the neo-Humean tradition. The problems arise from an excessive reliance on the *content* of what is experienced, and insufficient attention being given to the experiential *process* and the forms of engagement and activity that the *subject* has to enter into as a precondition for the process to take place. This vitiates the approach not only of neo-Humeans such as Parfit but also of many other philosophers, both in the analytic tradition and also (though less clearly) in the Continental tradition, who share this content-based methodology, as I have indicated elsewhere (Binns 1990a, 1994). It would also appear to have broadly comparable consequences for the dominant cognitivist paradigm in psychology, where this methodology plays a similar role (Still and Costall 1991).

However, notwithstanding the arguments of this paper it is important to recognize the considerable agreement that exists between large parts of Parfit's theory of persons and those of many contemporary psychotherapeutic theorists. This is most apparent with regard to the question of

the identity of persons, and the separation of one person from another. This agreement can be characterized as a common opposition to the assumptions of individualism as they are found in the classical theory of liberalism (Binns 1990b); individualist psychoanalysis on the original Freudian model; and religions such as those in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, which depend on identities between persons and souls, and sharp separations between one soul and another. Parfit's work on the separability of streams of consciousness suggests that whatever else they are, persons are not unfractured, seamless wholes with singular historical pasts, as the above theories often take them to be. And, among others, many contemporary therapeutic theorists within the humanistic tradition would agree.

In the gestalt approach, for instance, the "I" is a complex fusion of elements that appear initially as objects in my consciousness but can subsequently be explored as gestalted layers of my own subjectivity. The "I" is thus to be built up from my ownership of and participation in my various body parts and their pains and excitements, the furniture of my dreams, the items depicted in my paintings, and so on; there is no simple, given, unitary person (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman 1972). Also, as in Parfit's critical present aims theory—and in contrast to Freud—the attention is entirely on the here and now: the past and the future are of relevance only insofar as they are actually present as current fantasies about what has been and what might be. This complex, layered notion of the person appears also in the subpersonalities of psychosynthesis, in Jungian archetypes, and in the various ego states posited by transactional analysis (Rowan 1990).

The differences remain, however. The theories of humanistic psychotherapy mentioned above, unlike those of Parfit, can probably best be understood through a methodology that conceives of research not as an exercise in intellectual autonomy but as a form of participative co-exploration with the item being explored (Reason 1988). At a practical level, such an approach views those engaged in the therapeutic process as clients rather than patients. At a theoretical level, it is generally favorable to systemic approaches to understanding personal processes, in which all items—the observer and theoretician included—are simultaneously viewed as both subject and object, as sets of "effectivities" and "affordances" (to use the terminology of James Gibson [1979]). Within such a viewpoint the awareness of a subject is already defined by his or her agency within the world (the counterpart to what Heidegger [1968] refers to as our "thrownness"). And this is not just one element that may be retained or removed by choice, but is the very cornerstone of the enterprise in question.

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