

SHOULD WE DISPENSE WITH THE IDEA OF PERSONHOOD?

THE IMPOVERISHMENT OF PHILOSOPHICAL LANGUAGE

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh?

(Shakespeare)

1. Introduction

“What is a person?”, or “who is a person” is a question which has obvious moral, theological and even legal consequences. As of late, both the recent literature in analytic philosophy and in continental philosophy have suggested that we should simply dispense with the idea of “personhood.” These questions and ideas are now apparently entangled in intractable puzzles; therefore, it has become frequent to suggest that we should entirely dispense with the idea of “personhood,” because the origin of which is more theological than strictly philosophical. As such, it seems to have no place in a secularized world or its vocabulary.¹

It has become frequent to make such a suggestion because, some say, in a moral and philosophical world—now deeply secularized—there is no place for notions whose roots are theological in origin. This is part of a trend that opens a chasm between the vocabularies of philosophy and theology. It is this same trend that seeks to jettison such ideas as “dignity,” “human nature,” and even social and political notions such as “promises,” “hospitality,” and “commitment.”

This essay argues that the notions of “person,” and even “rational nature,” which are essential in theological exploration, cannot, however, be easily discarded from the philosophical vocabulary either. Discarding these notions would imply an impoverishment of philosophical language itself.

The exploration of the philosophical problem of personal identity, which is the focus of much recent literature, framed in terms of the relationship between mind and brain cannot dispense entirely the notion. The paper argues that that the preferred route of access is a “metaphysics” that preserves the noetic heterogeneity of beings, because it is the current “scientific” straitjacket that has made very articulation of the question fruitless.

2. Articulating the Problems of Personal Identity

An answer to the question “What is a person” or “In what consists personal identity?” should begin in a way that does not alienate either analytical philosophers or phenomenologists, i.e. by examining the articulation of the question itself. Indeed, the question may be said to contain a certain ambiguity, or a certain diversity of meanings. In a sense, the question points to the set of characteristics that define *a person*, i.e., which make them *the person he or she is*. There is however another meaning, which is more basic, if not deeper: what makes someone *a person*? Both descriptions--person’s identity as *contingent individual*

¹ We entirely discarded any references to previous published works of the authors, in accordance with the submission rules.

specificity and identity as the *permanent properties of an individual* (or class of individuals, sensitive or rational) are obviously related. We will provisionally take the question in the latter sense.

Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the question can be answered in legal terms rather than philosophical terms: A Roman slave or a baby (or fetus) is not or was not *a person* in some historical moments but, on the contrary, “something” that was born, bought “its” freedom or died in servitude². If in legal terms the answers seem clear though arbitrary—social fiat dominates—the most common philosophical justification is that being a person is inextricably linked to certain “mental” or “moral” properties³ that the slave lacked only *legally*, but fools and babies lack *de facto*. But as war is too important to be left to the military, personhood is too important to be left to lawyers and judges.

The concept of “person” was not introduced in philosophy without a cost: The Greek word designated the mask used by actors in the tragic theater⁴ and therefore Roman Lawyers and Christian theologians had to clarify that by person they meant rational individuals. “Person” designated not only an outward manifestation, but an *individual* being. Similarly, today, those who think that dolphins or pigs have intelligence justifiably call them “non-human persons”⁵ Christians theologians who thought otherwise reserved the expression for the Divine Persons, angels and men.⁶

The history behind the Christian meaning of “person,” which we inherit and appropriate variously today in the secular world, begins in large part with theological controversies in the first millennium of Christianity. The most conspicuous development came as a result of attending to the difficulties of the Christology and that of Trinitarian theology.⁷ The critical turning point was in making sense of Christ’s relationship to God, according to the Jewish scriptures, the New Testament and the patristic testimony.

By the time of Latin Scholasticism, these Trinitarian and Christological controversies had largely been settled. Thomas Aquinas, of course among the primary figures of Latin Scholasticism in the second millennium of Christianity, had the difficulty of critically appropriating the newfound Greek thought of Aristotle (and the Islamic commentators, notably Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd) in a way reconcilable with the Trinitarian theology and Christology which came before him. Many found him to be successful in this manner—notably the Thomist historian Étienne Gilson. Aquinas’ philosophical definition is taken from Boethius: “an individual substance of a rational nature” (*S. Th.*, I, q. 29). This success may make us forget how difficult it was to introduce into philosophy the concept of person.

Unlike the legal definition, this philosophical concept, at first glance, pertains to the individual whose nature is rational from cradle (and even before birth) to grave: idiots and infants alike.

2. Persons, Reasons, Brain-Halves

The issues of individual personality became cloudier when analytical philosophers ceased to think in terms of “rational *nature*.” We must briefly examine some recent debates and try to understand the reason for the

² P. VEYNE (ed.), *Histoire de la vie privée* (Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1999) 57 et seq.

³ See for instance L. R. Baker, *Persons and Bodies* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000) chap. 3.

⁴ C. MEYER, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1993). Although Meyer’s work focuses on Aeschylus’ tragedies, his description applies to all others tragic authors.

⁵ See for instance P. SINGER (ED.), *In Defense of Animals* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1985) 40-51.

⁶ R. J. PLANTINGA, T. R. THOMPSON, and M. D. LUNDBERG, 2010, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010) part 2, chap. 9.

⁷ See R. A. KERESZTY, *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology*, 3rd ed., (St. Paul’s Press, New York, 2011), Part II.

impasse that leads some philosophers to entirely dismiss this issue or stumble on Non-Identity paradoxes (and similar problems in the same vein).

All these debates culminating in the Non-Identity paradoxes have a genealogy going back to early modernity, and without which we cannot understand why they are problematic. It is difficult today to read without some surprise the opening phrase of Descartes' *Meditation VI*: "Nothing further now remains, but to inquire whether material things exist"⁸. Descartes ignores the issue of the union between the corporeal and the incorporeal—of which Gassendi⁹ reminds him in his *Fifth objection*—to focus on what truly concerns him: to show that what is outside the mind consists of pure geometric extension¹⁰. This is a direct consequence of his method: what is true of the concept is true of the thing itself, so we must start by purging the qualities, nature, forms and other vestiges of Aristotelian metaphysics that dominated philosophy for centuries.

The fallout of post-Aristotelian metaphysics however was in germ in the very articulation of the Cartesian questions. If the victory of the argument in the public opinion was perhaps achieved by Molière in *The Imaginary Invalid*¹¹ rather than by sophisticated philosophical reasoning, nonetheless immediately some among the Cartesians took the consequences of the problem raised by Gassendi seriously: *do we have a clear and distinct idea of how the mind affects the body and vice versa?* This was an issue that has occupied the best philosophical "minds" for over sixty years. The question, however, for reasons that would later become clear, could not be answered in the terms in which it was raised, and so it is not surprising that La Mettrie, in a book titled *L'Homme Machine*, declares about Descartes: "It is true that this famous philosopher made many mistakes, as nobody denies; but he understood animal nature and was the first to demonstrate perfectly that animals were mere machines. (...) how can we, without ingratitude, not pardon all his errors!"¹²

If the efforts of Descartes followers led his theories to unexpected conclusions, the despair of Descartes himself to find, somewhere inside the brain—in the infamous pineal gland—the connection between body and mind, introduced for the first time the brain in the field of "metaphysical" concepts. Descartes was the initiator of brain-body metaphysics.

The brain is an unknown domain and an uncharted territory whose map is yet full of surprises. Since the 60s, however, the analytical theory of personality has suffered a strange twist due to the consideration of a curious theoretical problem. Studies of the brain have shown the possibility of "fission"¹³ between its two halves, left and right, raising the question: "Which of these halves am I?"¹⁴ Strictly speaking, this formulation is incorrect, although it continues to be used currently, because the issue stopped being seen as intrinsic (the experience of an "I"), but became instead a phenomenon to be analyzed extrinsically by an impartial observer. The notion of personhood underwent a fission into two different perspectives, the inner self and a view from nowhere. In the intervening decades, in addition to the catalyst thought experiments based on brain fission, we have seen the accumulation of concurrent opinions—and rejoinders—based on brain transplants, fourth-

⁸ R. DESCARTES, *Meditations*, collected in R. M. EATON, *Descartes Selections* (Scribners, New York, 1927) 145.

⁹ P. GASSENDI, *Vth. Objections*, collected in R. M. EATON, *op. cit.*, 245-246.

¹⁰ R. DESCARTES, *Reply to Objections*, collected in R. M. EATON, *op. cit.*, 262.

¹¹ In his play *Le Malade Imaginaire*, Molière mocked the philosophers claiming that opium made people fall asleep because it contained "dormitive properties". MOLIÈRE, *Oeuvres complètes de Molière*, vol. 2 (Garnier Frères, Paris, 1871), third Act, scene 3. Mockery proved to be more effective than argumentation in XVIII Century opinion.

¹² J. O. LA METTRIE, *Machine Man and Other Writings* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996) 35.

¹³ E. OLSON, *The Human Animal* (Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1999) 46-51. See also: E. OLSON, "Was Jekyll Hyde?", in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 66 (2003) 328-48.

¹⁴ The seminal paper was THOMAS NAGEL'S "Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness," *Synthese* 22 (May 1971) 396-413.

dimension travel, and other conceptual experiments which attempt to elucidate the unity of the “person,” or how the person is “divided” or transformed over time.

3. In *what* consists the identity of a person from one time to another?

“Personal Identity Through Time” is the subject (and title) of the first chapter of Robert Nozick's¹⁵ book *Philosophical Explanations*. Nozick in this text reflects on a paradox, or rather of some puzzles which illustrate the paradox that the English philosopher Bernard Williams had posited in a Journal paper in 1970 entitled “The Self and the Future”¹⁶. Williams later included it and expanded his ideas in his book *Problems of the Self*¹⁷.

In a nutshell, the first puzzle that Williams presents is this: two individuals, A and B, see their memories transferred to each other's' bodies. Before the exchange, A and B are informed that one of the bodies will receive \$100,000 while the other is tortured. Williams notes that regardless of what actually happens to the 'A-body-person' with B memories, this A person identifies himself with the earlier B person, and vice versa¹⁸. This seems to indicate that concern for what happens to oneself in the future does not necessarily involve what happens to one's body, challenging the “philosophical arguments designed to show that bodily continuity [is] at least a necessary condition of personal identity”¹⁹: He therefore suggests that it is reasonable for someone to identify himself instead with his own memories, impressions, etc., and not with his body.

But Williams also features a second thought experiment in which A is only informed that he “himself” in the future will be tortured, and that at that future time he will not remember anything that relates to his own past—his images and impressions will come from B. Fear of torture by A, despite the (anticipated) complete psychological dissociation, leads the author to conclude that the fear that, in spite of everything, plagues A is based on the conviction that “my undergoing physical pain in the future is not excluded by any psychological state I may be in at the time”²⁰. The second case appears to indicate, unlike the first, that bodily continuity is integral to identity. An A-body-person faces “risk” when deciding to transfer the prospect of torture to the B-body-person, and this is the risk that Williams considers (“perhaps neurotically”²¹) the essential feature of the personal identity problem.

The paradox is this: each thought experiment leads to opposite results, despite the situation described being objectively identical, and the impossibility of arriving at a logical conclusion adds to our perplexity. Williams however ends with a note. There are aspects of personal identity related to bodily continuity and aspects of “mental” continuity (i.e., experiences and memories)²².

In general, it is assumed that this dichotomy coincides with yet another dichotomy: aspects of personal identity in the first person (mental dimension) and third person (the body). The two examples show an unexpectedly inverse relationship between mental properties and bodily persistence, and body properties and

¹⁵ R. NOZICK, *Philosophical Explanations* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1981) 29-70.

¹⁶ B. WILLIAMS, “The Self and the Future”, in *Philosophical Review*, 79 (2), 1970, 161-180.

¹⁷ B. WILLIAMS, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1973).

¹⁸ B. WILLIAMS, *Ibidem* 47-48.

¹⁹ B. WILLIAMS, *Ibidem* 51.

²⁰ B. WILLIAMS, *Ibidem* 53.

²¹ B. WILLIAMS, *Ibidem* 59.

²² B. WILLIAMS, *Ibidem* 62.

mental persistence²³. Nozick chooses precisely this, among the many puzzles surrounding the issue of identity, to articulate the problem which also concerns us in this paper: “how, given changes, *can* there be identity of something from one time to another, and in what does this identity consist?”²⁴.

Nozick’s purpose is to explain the assumptions underlying Williams’ paradox. What is implied in the paradox is as follows: for something (x) to be the same as something else (y) through time, it is assumed that identity depends on certain properties of both (x, y) and their mutual relationship, but that no other factor should be considered in this context.

4. The Closest Continuer Criterion and Overlapping Chains of Strong Connectedness

Is this so? Nozick gives a graphic example and explores its transposition into the case of personal identity: Vienna Circle survivors meet again in Istanbul and consider themselves the followers of the same group, only to discover afterwards that the remaining members took refuge in the US. Which is the “true” Vienna circle? What defines identity over time?²⁵ This metaphor sheds some light on the issue and leads him to think that what is called identity through time is the “*closest continuer*”²⁶. The notion to which we refer when we speak of the identity of things is *continuity*, which allows us to provide the framework for an answer, but not yet to fill in the details thereof, because there are at least two important properties to consider: spatial-temporal continuity and continuity of features or physical elements.

Put differently, the situation resembles another puzzle, Theseus’ ship, the planks of which were replaced periodically, only for it to be discovered later that another boat was fully restored with the original boards. Continuity in space and time points to Theseus’ ship that was kept through gradual maintenance; but the continuity of the physical elements regards the ship that, in this example, is born again from the original boards which had been stored²⁷.

What Nozick calls applications of this continuity theory to the problem of personality are various cases in which the brain is duplicated, including its memories (case 1); transplanted (case 2); brain patterns are transferred from a dying person to a new person (3); only half of the brain is transplanted (4); or removed (5); or both simultaneously (6); or even a similar brain is generated at random in the infinite universe (7). Not only that: Nozick also notes that it is not impossible, as in the Vienna Circle analogy, for there to be an overlap of two identical persons²⁸. These thought experiments allow him to clarify what we mean by the continuity of personal identity over time and to establish the conceptual approach to tackling the problem (notions such as “relational”, “closest relative”, and especially “intrinsic abstract structural”)²⁹. “Intrinsic abstract structure” is something strangely analogous to the Aristotelian “form” mocked by Molière.³⁰

Nozick’s surprising conclusion is that even in most of these extreme situations we can predict in which cases a person has an identity over time with the simple model of the “closest continuer,” while ignoring the underlying complexity. Underlying complexity is the short-name for all the mental and physical differences,

²³ B. WILLIAMS, *Ibidem* 64 and ff.; specially objections 70-81. Nevertheless, Williams seems to know more than what this *aporia* suggests and, in a subsequent essay, he uses language analysis to refute the (four) objections that still upset the affirmative answer to the question “Are people bodies?”

²⁴ R. NOZICK, *Philosophical Explanations*, 29.

²⁵ R. NOZICK, *Ibidem* 29-31.

²⁶ R. NOZICK, *Ibidem* 33.

²⁷ R. NOZICK, *Ibidem* 29-33.

²⁸ R. NOZICK, *Ibidem* 37-40.

²⁹ R. NOZICK, *Ibidem* 47-48.

³⁰ See ARISTOTLE’S, *Metaphysics* I, with Nozick, 1981, 47.

impressions and memories of each and every individual, or to put it briefly: the set of characteristics that define a person as defined in the beginning of this paper (the contingent subject of “personality”)³¹.

Nozick, as a libertarian political theorist, defends the value of free will and, unlike La Mettrie, believes that we are not just a “machine-man.”

If Nozick kept the problem in the philosophical agenda, Derek Parfit led it into perfection in his book *Reasons and Persons*³². Science fiction stories such as Star Trek including teleportation through space and time entered his metaphysics. It is obvious that someone at this point will ask himself (as Quine did):

The method of science fiction has its uses in philosophy, but (...) I wonder whether the limits of the method are properly heeded. To seek what is 'logically required' for sameness of person under unprecedented circumstances is to suggest that words have some logical force beyond what our past needs have invested them with³³.

Parfit, however, was convinced that these imaginary situations involve something more than words: deep beliefs about what personal identity is³⁴. He first describes the space-time continuum, which is the normal identity criterion for physical objects, and then the psychological and physical criteria. His purpose is to clarify the false assumptions of “physicalism” or materialism, that is, the thesis that there is nothing real about mental states, which are no more than another kind of physical event. Not all philosophers are materialists but, according to Parfit, those who are not “physicalists” are dualists or idealists. What he tries to show is that, paradoxically, materialists might accept the psychological criterion of continuity of the person and the dualist could accept the physiological criteria of temporal continuity. This paradox seems revealing to him: as there is no adequate criterion of personal identity through time, he concludes that *persons do not exist beyond their elements*. According to him, persons do not exist beyond their present configuration of physical and mental composition.

Parfit argues that reality should be described impersonally (from Mars, as the French saying goes). There does not have to be a definite answer to the question “will I continue to exist?,” even after examining all the data involved. It is a mistake to assume that what is of interest in personal identity is survival: what matters is the relation R—that he describes as “overlapping chains of strong connectedness”³⁵.

Now, at this point we may wonder if such obscure phraseology is much better than the Aristotelian notion “form” that Descartes jettisoned, and Molière mocked.

5. Novelty, the Limits of Linguistic Analysis, and the Official Doctrine

The controversy is not exhausted, therefore, in the problem of the *criterion* of defining identity through time. There is also debate as to whether personal identity matters, or personal survival, and some suggest that the collective survival of humanity is more important³⁶. A Kantian might perhaps raise the objection that we are lacking the resources to describe moral agency, but the contingent birth of Kant was previously submitted to the same “torture” by Parfit³⁷.

³¹ R. NOZICK, *Ibidem* 110-114.

³² D. PARFIT, *Reasons and Persons* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984), Third Part.

³³ W. V. QUINE, 1972, 490. Parfit does not ignore the problem: D. PARFIT, 1984: 199.

³⁴ D. PARFIT, *op. cit.*, 179.

³⁵ D. PARFIT, *op. cit.*, 233-238.

³⁶ See S. SCHEFFLER, *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013) 15 and ff..

³⁷ D. PARFIT, *op. cit.*, 352 and ff..

What is at stake? Complex arguments, refuted assertions, real and improbable counterexamples, surprising theses and stubborn convictions, puzzles, abstract and very real conditions, challenges to the discovery of new theses and surprising conclusions³⁸ are part of an analytical philosopher's ecumenical paraphernalia. Nevertheless, what is really at stake in these debates, involving more than a hundred titles since 1970—not to mention the countless scientific papers—seems to be always centered around the need to clarify the concepts or the beliefs embedded in language.

That is why Quine's question seems so relevant: Do words have some power beyond the force which the past social need for words invested in them? The risk is that *puzzles*, challenges and arguments show us no more than the logical consequences of our own convictions or opinions, even prejudices. Of course, sometimes the results are counter-intuitive, a situation that should not be surprising, since the task that science and philosophy have imposed on themselves for three centuries is to replace the concepts of common sense with rigorous artificial "constructs," or if we prefer an older idiom, *doxa* by *epistēmē*.

In this context it does not even seem significant that the search for truth, generally considered impossible to achieve, gets replaced by the mere clarification of concepts. The perplexity that remains after revisiting this controversy is whether philosophers know *much more* than their method allows. It is not clear how the analysis of language leads to Bernard Williams' purported physicalism, supports Robert Nozick's telescopic view of the universe,³⁹ and releases Derek Parfit's of his own "Self" in a kind of diluted collective.

Because in each and every case there remains the dichotomy between psychological and physical (or mental) continuity. We are thus led to conclude that we remain imprisoned in Cartesian dualism. Indeed, it is hard not to recognize some truth in Gilbert Ryle's assessment: "There is a doctrine about the nature and place of minds which is so prevalent among theorists and even among laymen that it deserves to be described as the official theory⁴⁰. In short, according to the author of *The Concept of Mind*, most philosophers, psychologists and believers, although admitting difficulties and reservations as to details (which they assume "can be overcome without serious modifications being made to the architecture of the theory"⁴¹), adhere today to a creed or doctrine which springs mainly from Descartes and states approximately the following:

With the doubtful exceptions of idiots and infants in arms every human being has both a body and a mind. Some would prefer to say that every human being is both a body and a mind. His body and his mind are ordinarily harnessed together, but after the death of the body his mind may continue to exist and function. Human bodies are in space and are subject to the mechanical laws which govern all other bodies in space. Bodily processes and states can be inspected by external observers. So a man's bodily life is as much a public affair as are the lives of animals and reptiles and even as the careers of trees, crystals and planets.

But minds are not in space, nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws. The workings of one mind are not witnessable by other observers; its career is private. Only I can take direct cognisance of the states and processes of my own mind⁴².

Consequently, we tend to think "*as if*" there is a ghost in La Mettrie's machine. To think otherwise would be more than problematic. Apparently, it is unthinkable and we are entangled in a seemingly indestructible

³⁸ Cf. R. NOZICK, 1974.

³⁹ M. E. BRATMAN, *Structures of Agency* (Oxford University Press Oxford, 2007) 107 and ff. explores this problem and highlights the fact that Nozick addresses this question because the lack of free-will undermines human dignity. Cf. R. NOZICK, *Philosophical Explanations* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1981) 291.

⁴⁰ G. RYLE, *The Concept of Mind* (Hutchinson's University Library, London, 2009) 1.

⁴¹ G. RYLE, *op. cit.*, 1.

⁴² G. RYLE, *op. cit.*, 1-2. By shortening the text, we also removed some paragraphs.

vocabulary. Although today we notice that most philosophers, or at least the non-believers, tend to think that the mind does not exist or works after death⁴³, even “physicalists” report two parallel stories, that of the body and that of the mind, and turn to “consciousness”, self-awareness and introspection as a source of answers.

Williams, we suspect, did not lose much time with statistics (except perhaps a show of hands in his classroom) to reach the conclusion that we prefer to be brain A in body B, or avoid the pain of body A: he merely resorted to self-knowledge. And Parfit did not free himself of the metaphors “inside” and “outside,” “external” and “internal” to describe the mental space: he just asserted that the mind that commands and the legs, arms and tongue that obey or what the eye sees and the mind perceives as smiles and grimaces that reveal moods can be described impersonally and that the “relationship R” is more important than the “Self,” without being able to avoid mentioning mental phenomena, since he depends on memories and impressions.

Ryle's efforts to describe man through his behavior, without reference to intentions, thoughts and sensations that precede, accompany and succeed man's actions, was relatively successful, but his “monism” was unable to eliminate “common sense” dualism.

Looking back, Karl Popper's comment in *Objective Knowledge* seems still current. While he seeks a solution to Hume's paradox and discusses the mind-body problem, he notes that many theories that attempt to overcome dualism end up defending some kind of monism, without fully overcoming the former and instead revealing an underlying dualism⁴⁴. He himself, in his *Unended Quest*, prefers to describe himself as a pluralist but he would rather be considered a dualist than to uphold any form of monism⁴⁵. In an interview with John Eccles, he goes as far as to suggest that there really is a “ghost in the machine”⁴⁶. It is true that he avoids talking about “substances,” but his solution nevertheless reveals the connection between two different kinds of things. Recent debates in the sequence of analytical libertarian metaphysics in the line of Robert Kane does not escape the dilemmas of the relation between minds and brains⁴⁷ (assuming full control of the body by the brain).

This is an instance where Popper identifies that dualism is replaced with monism, concealing yet an underlying dualism. Whatever we think about it, Ryle, nonetheless identifies correctly his “guilty,” the author of the “official doctrine.”

6. The Cartesian Fission of Reality

Descartes' intention was to mathematically prove the “spirituality” of the mind. He began by replacing the scholastic soul with a mind without a body. The mathematical Cartesianism requires the fission of reality into substances as different as the ideas that we have about them. In such a way that when the *philosopher is busy with metaphysical notions he should not know that he has a body*, and when the *scientist is busy with physics it is best that he forgets that he has a mind*. The Cartesian mind is essentially thought. It is a thinking thing (*res cogitans*). It is “t is a thing which doubts, understands, conceives, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels”⁴⁸. but not something that feeds or moves because such notions refer to the body, which is an altogether different idea, clear but distinct.

⁴³ See S. SCHEFFLER, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ See an explanation in K. POPPER, *Objective Knowledge* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979) 153 and ss.

⁴⁵ K. POPPER, *Unended Quest* (Routledge, London and New York, 1992) 218.

⁴⁶ See in particular Popper in J. ECCLES, K. POPPER, *The Self and Its Brain* (Springer, Berlin, 1977) 464.

⁴⁷ See the collection of texts in D. PALMER, *Libertarian Free Will* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014).

⁴⁸ R. DESCARTES, *Meditations*, collected in R. M. EATON, *op. cit.*, 100.

Of course, as Étienne Gilson reports in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*⁴⁹, when Voltaire crossed the English Channel in 1728, he met the flourishing of the moderate empiricism of Locke, instead of the logical Cartesian “dreamers,” who were emmeshed in the mind-body problem, or of the “communication of substances”⁵⁰. Locke’s was moderate because he did not ignore facts nor he did derive a law from a single fact. Locke, however, in the first chapter of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*⁵¹, if he denies innate ideas, he does assert that we come across things through sensations (external or bodily) and reflection (about the inner workings of the mind). We are thus facing still two sources of knowledge and two realities. Of course, the mind travels in the same carriage that moves the body, and Locke does not rule out the existence of a “thinking matter” as the essence of the mind, a solution that obviates the problem of the communication between two completely different “natures” of kinds of things⁵². According to Locke “personhood” is just a “forensic” concept; it is supposed to track one’s interests and responsibilities. Voltaire was drawn to Locke’s hypothetical materialism⁵³. It was up to Hume to follow Locke’s empirical logic to its conclusion. A larger chasm than that existing between the two halves of the brain was to last. But, as is widely known, Hume merely drew the consequences of Locke’s empiricism: we have neither innate ideas nor innate principles, nor can we observe physical causality, which is nothing more than a spatial-temporal contiguity. Nor can we see inside the “Self,” which is nothing but a bundle of “inner feelings”⁵⁴.

To sum up, the response to the question, “what does a person’s identity consist of?” still stumbles in the same dichotomy, for all that has happened in between Hume’s age and ours is that the “metaphysical status of the problem, as Ryle calls it, has changed: today we speak of the brain or “thinking matter” because the mind is a fruit or a re-description of the body. Not even Kant awake from his dogmatic slumber⁵⁵ could free himself of the notion of the mind as a Regulatory Idea, though he was unable to demonstrate its existence, since thoughts and feelings have what he called an “apodictic” character: they are self-evident to us.

7. If Husserl's Phenomenology is the answer, what is the question?

If nothing has really changed, then there is nothing new to be convinced about. The problem is compounded because even if we think that chimeras are an illusion, or pain a mere nervous reflex, and our identity is nothing but a confusing set of synapses connected to each other, we can nevertheless hardly deny that we feel pain when we feel it. For this reason, those who are unconvinced of Anglo-Saxon empiricism persist, like Hume or Descartes before him, in beginning with the mind and rejecting the impersonal description of the analytical theory of identity.

Does first person phenomenology fare any better? Phenomenology seems to be able to account for the diachronic unity of the subject, which is the personal identity through time without putting the “I” outside or above the flow of experience. Although we live by a set of experiences, beyond it remains a “Self” that feels these experiences. The feeling of “being mine” seems immune to error: the phenomenon known as “immunity to error through misidentification relative to the first-person pronoun”⁵⁶. According to Husserl, any type of

⁴⁹ E. GILSON, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1937) 164.

⁵⁰ VOLTAIRE, *Lettres philosophiques*, 2 vols. (Hachette, Paris, 1917) vol. II, 1 and 5.

⁵¹ J. LOCKE, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2 vols. (Ed. J. A. St. John, London, 1877) vol. 1, 129.

⁵² See J. LOCKE, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, 339-411.

⁵³ See E. GILSON, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1937) 172.

⁵⁴ D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1960) 252.

⁵⁵ E. KANT, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004) see preface.

⁵⁶ E. HUSSERL, *Erste Philosophie* (1923/4) vol. 8 (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1959) (the original text is from 1923/24). Wittgenstein also addressed this question in his *Blue Book* (L. WITTGENSTEIN, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Harper and

experience (perception, memory, imagination) has a common time frame such that any moment of experience contains a reference to retained moments of past experience, an opening to what is present and a potential anticipation of experience on the verge of happening. This retention does not instantly disappear but lasts over time and without this duration many perceptions would be inexplicable. Husserl's favorite example of this is the musical melody. Husserl asserts, "When I say I, I grasp myself in a simple reflection. But this self-experience is like every experience, and in particular every perception, a mere directing myself towards something that was already there for me, that was already conscious, but not thematically experienced, not noticed"⁵⁷. Being aware of oneself is, of course, not the same as capturing a pure self, which exists apart from the flow of experience. When Hume in his *Treatise on Human Nature* states that he never finds a "self" while inspecting his inner experiences, but only particular sensations and perceptions, he ignores this basic datum, because he seeks the "self" among his experiences of himself. Personal identity is, however, per Husserl, a door that opens outwards.

Husserl avers, notwithstanding, that this pre-conscious reflection is only implicit, which means that I am not confronted with the experience of things as belonging to myself. The idea of pre-conscious reflection relates to the idea that experiences have a subjective tone, a certain phenomenal quality of "how one feels." It is typically the case with bodily experiences, such as pain or pleasure, but it is also the case with perceptual experiences, or desire, or intellectual comprehension. To taste something is different from recalling that we tasted it. There exists, simultaneously with these experiences something that runs through all these feelings and perceptions, which is the idea that despite all their diversity there is a certain identity, the stark character of perceptions in the first person: a certain *being mine* or being my experiences, an immediate data that is not mediated by ideas or representations. Being mine is not a quality like being red or hard; it does not refer to experienced content, nor to a synchronic and diachronic sum of experiences. Rather, it refers to their presence in the first person, because they are "mine", in a different way from being someone else's⁵⁸.

The *inspectio sui*, according to Husserl, is a precondition of the "self-direction" of the will itself. The self-awareness is neither a mirror of the act of thinking, nor a complete distortion of that act. Husserl, however, faced the same difficulty that Descartes faced before the evil genius in leaving the inner self, which explains why he starts as a quasi-idealist and is usually ignored by the sober analytic philosophy. In a relatively late text, his *Cartesian Meditations*, he shows beyond the "elective affinities" that he presents (he proposes a neo-cartesianism) the same psychological root of his project: a dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs, and the consequent pursuit of "philosophy as rigorous science"⁵⁹. Husserl notes:

The splintering of present-day philosophy, with its perplexed activity, sets us thinking. When we attempt to view western philosophy as a unitary science, its decline since the middle of the nineteenth century is unmistakable (...) Instead of a unitary living philosophy, we have a philosophical literature growing beyond all bounds and almost without coherence. Instead of a serious discussion among conflicting theories that, in their very conflict, demonstrate the intimacy with which they belong together, the commonness of their underlying convictions,

Row, New York, 1958) 66-67) and S. SHOEMAKER popularized the expression (S. SHOEMAKER, "Self-reference and Self-awareness", in *Journal of Philosophy*, 65 (1968), 555-567).

⁵⁷ E. HUSSERL, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1973) 492-493.

⁵⁸ On perception in Husserl, see the excellent summary of K. MULLIGAN, "Perception", in B. SMITH and D. W. SMITH (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995).

⁵⁹ A short introduction to the thought of Husserl can be found in J. N. MOHANTY, "The development of Husserl's thought" in B. SMITH, and D. R. SMITH (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995).

and an unswerving belief in a true philosophy, we have a pseudo-reporting and a pseudo-criticizing, a mere semblance of philosophizing seriously with and for one another⁶⁰.

In short, there are as many philosophies as philosophers. Something akin to the many and variegated “sects” of scholastic philosophers⁶¹ a situation not unlike that which Descartes encountered, leading him to search for a firm foundation in the *cogito*. Both were ambitious efforts resorting to “consciousness” or the “Self” as the starting point, albeit with one major difference: Husserl always considered his task as a collaborative one, while Descartes noted that the works “directed by many men are less perfect than that in which a single individual intervenes”⁶². However, Husserl, like Descartes before him, took mathematics as a standard and it is no wonder that the “conscience” or “Self” is, in both cases, the Archimedean point for sustaining the world. Husserl provides the answer to the question of identity only if the question is “how to achieve a firm and rigorous science?”⁶³ But one must choose between an impartial and rigorous observation and a committed self. We cannot have the cake and eat it. The diachronic continuity of a person is a subjective “I” that cannot be grasped impartially.

It is therefore not without irony that, just as Locke and Hume in a sense extend and radicalize Descartes, Heidegger does the same thing with Husserl. Husserl thought that neo-Kantians in his reflection on science were beginning by the roof⁶⁴. Husserl realized, furthermore, that scientific knowledge of the world was not the perfection of its “natural understanding,” but a derivation of it that makes us forget the very foundations of scientific knowledge: all knowledge must begin with the perception of the world as it exists *before any theorizing*. Heidegger followed this line of thought even further. The primary subject is not perception, but things as experienced in the individual human context to which they belong, including the historical context. There cannot therefore be a “natural understanding” of the world because every understanding is historical.

Heidegger explains his point this way: “the Dasein, as existing, is there for itself, even when the ego does not expressly direct itself to itself in the manner of its own peculiar turning around and turning back, which in phenomenology is called inner perception as contrasted with outer. The self is there for the Dasein itself without reflection and without inner perception. *before* all reflection. Reflection, in the sense of a turning back, is only a mode of self-*apprehension*, but not the mode of primary self-disclosure”⁶⁵.

A radical historicism, existentialist, as Heidegger’s rejects the possibility of any objective analysis, since all life is *commitment*. His reasoning runs as follows: “Moreover, since the theoretical analysis has its basis outside of life, it will never be able to understand life. The theoretical analysis of life is noncommittal and fatal to commitment, but life means commitment.”⁶⁶ Husserl’s existentialist descendants define thinking as essentially subservient to life. According to Heidegger (or Sartre), this world is hopelessly subjective. All knowledge is based on an unprovable vision of the world, and no alternative is left to us except choosing *in*

⁶⁰ E. HUSSERL, *Cartesian Meditations* (Springer-Science+Business Media B.V, Dordrecht, 1960) 4-6, modified in the German version E. HUSSERL, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge* (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1973) 5-6. By shortening the text, we removed some paragraphs.

⁶¹ E. GILSON, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1937) 131; see R. DESCARTES, *Discours de la méthode: texte et commentaire*, E. GILSON (ed.) (J. Vrin, Paris, 1930) 128.

⁶² R. DESCARTES, *Discours de la méthode et essais* (Léopold Cerf, Paris, 1902) 11. ‘il n’y a pas tant de perfection dans les ouvrages composés de plusieurs pièces, & faits de la main de divers maitres, qu’en ceux auxquels un seul à travaillé.’

⁶³ See the beginning of the seminal essay of E. HUSSERL, “Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft”, In *Logos*, 1 (1910) 289–341.

⁶⁴ Cf. L. STRAUSS, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy”, *Interpretation*, 2 (1), 1971.

⁶⁵ M. HEIDEGGER, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1975) 159.

⁶⁶ L. STRAUSS, *Natural Right and History* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1965) 26.

*the face of nothingness*⁶⁷. Neutrality or suspension of judgment (*epochē*) is impossible. What matters is the seriousness of the commitment. Between rigorous philosophy and existential *pathos*, we said, one must choose.

8. Conclusion: the burdens of reason and noetic heterogeneity

It is true that a wide variety of experience and categories of thought paved the way to Montaigne's brand of skepticism from which Descartes, Husserl, Williams among many others tried to escape; however the straitjacket in which Cartesian dualism (or idealistic monism, or physicalist monism) keeps us, was born out of a search for "exactness" or rigor and certainty which proved excessive. We may have to sacrifice this degree of accuracy in the tradeoff between precision and knowledge. Socratic puzzles come in the form "What is F?", although Socrates did not focus on the ultimate principles of the universe. If the Platonic dialogues include many Socratic *puzzles*, these are directed towards man's pursuit of excellence, or to the question of how we should live. Perhaps personal identity should be explored as *consisting of projects or purposes*, people being defined by their choices as "dependent rational animals" (to abuse MacIntyre's expression)⁶⁸.

This possible answer to the question of identity has the advantage of bringing philosophy from the heavens down to earth, i.e., of treating every problem according to the different ways in which they appear to man. Each time one of the pre-Socratic philosophers discovered one of the principles of things, he could not resist reducing everything to this definite or indefinite principle (water, air, movement, *apeiron*). Socrates, however, took on the issues in their noetic heterogeneity, which implied temporarily setting aside the pretensions of science.

Even in the theoretical realm, the consideration of each problem in its own noetic heterogeneity has a secondary advantage, and not a negligible one. It certainly helps in preventing the most common fallacies in the unfinished quest for answers about personal identity—which look tempting because they emerge as possible shortcuts: both fleshless spiritualism and accounting for personal identity by reference to the subhuman functions are fallacies that enjoy exceptional influence in the ethics and social sciences of our time. Some examples include explaining out man's identity through the subconscious or in sexual libido, in class belonging, in the pursuit of naked power, in self-interest. On the contrary, starting with the identity of a person as defined by his/her projects (or *telos*) can reveal a surprising variety of behaviors. The truth is that even analytical personality theory recognizes (and then forgets) that a person /brain A can, after all, not choose a body B to prevent torture if such a one is a Christian phenomenologist in the concentration camps, like Edith Stein, or can dispense with seeking the \$100,000 reward at all cost, even if he is a Harvard student involved in game theory facing unjust outputs. There are many layers in the identity, each with its own thickness.

Rational argument, reflective balance, logical positivism, philosophy of language and other systems of thought do not by themselves do justice to the scope of human experience. Many of these models conflict with each other, and some become obsolete because they cannot account for certain facets of experience. The basic assumptions of these efforts, as Isaiah Berlin was fond of repeating, despite much brute experience left out or included, imply the uncritical transfer of methods from one sector to another (say from mathematics to Cartesianism, from Newtonian physics to Kant's investigation of the universe, from formal logic to Russell's philosophy, etc.), such that such-and-such method's application distorts all observation. Logical positivism, analytic philosophy, and rigorous and ambitious efforts in the empiricist tradition use a substrate of unanalyzed assumptions and frameworks that their own methods cannot explain, and which render their claims of ultimate explanation empty. Isaiah Berlin used to say that "It is the sense of the general texture of experience - the most

⁶⁷ M. HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1962) 279 and ss.

⁶⁸ A. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, 1999).

rudimentary awareness of such patterns - that constitutes the foundation of knowledge, that is itself not open to inductive or deductive reasoning: for both these methods rest upon it”⁶⁹.

An agent with purposes in a world that presents obstacles: this is the most fundamental *datum*. Grasping it implies avoiding the tendency to follow Hume and Locke in interpreting man as a bundle of emotions, feelings, a *tabula rasa* on which sense impressions are inscribed, and escape the dubious effort of categorizing all meaningful propositions in clear logical classes, while rejecting the others as meaningless and devoid of truth. The philosophical question conceived in terms of noetic heterogeneity seems to find more resources in modern literature than in modern philosophy: a single page from Shakespeare⁷⁰ can teach us more about identity or the human condition than a large volume by Heidegger. The history of ideas, as studied by Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor, for example, is more likely to help us than game theory or science fiction.

On the one hand, perhaps we can describe moods or the “mind” that commands and the limbs that execute impersonally. On the other hand, experiences and desires, tasting, running, standing, envy, resentment, happiness, depression or dwelling on an abstract idea, all have a certain identity in being mine or being my experiences, different from any synchronic or diachronic sum of experiences.

Although a full answer is beyond the scope of this (and probably any other) essay, and while we acknowledge the “burdens of reason” (intellectual error, disputes among the wise, lack of time and attention, etc.) we consider it possible to find a way forward in two different dimensions, one negative and one positive. The first, as we have said, means ruling out common fallacies, and the second aims to enrich the contents of the reply to the question of what a person is.⁷¹ The opinion (or *doxa*) that the history of ideas proposes to examine reveals a rich panorama. The history of ideas is fundamentally a large-scale effort to respond to the injunction of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: “Know thyself.” We are animals who feel pain, get injured, eat food, bleed and laugh. We are more than a mind, a brain, or a foot that feels pain: it is a person with their whole body that suffers. We are also rational and dependent animals, defined by social life. Jews and Christians, Muslims and atheists, English lovers of freedom and German lovers of order, children and parents, rulers and philosophers, we are all things that in everyday language emerge as answers to the question of what gives us identity.

We cannot properly frame these identity problems if we entirely discard the notions of “person” as “rational in nature,” an idea whose introduction into philosophy was hardly trivial.

⁶⁹ I. BERLIN, *Concepts and Categories* (Princeton University Press Princeton, 1999) 114-115.

⁷⁰ W. SHAKESPEARE, *The Merchant of Venice* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006) 78.

⁷¹ The works of Isaiah Berlin or Charles Taylor seem to follow this path: I. Berlin. *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, H. HARDY (ed.), (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2013) and C. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1989).

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