# What Matters in Survival: Life Trajectories and the Possibility of Virtual Immersion

In this paper I argue that although identity is not what matters in survival, what does matter is not preserved in fission cases. Specifically, I claim that what matters in the survival of persons is what I call their "life trajectories." And the preservation of these entities entails a singular existence, though not one that entails the preservation of identity. Life trajectories incorporate externalist constraints on what matters in survival. My argument for these constraints is based on considering the certain kinds of cases of complete virtual immersion — the immersion of a psychological subject in a completely virtual world, a world in which her experiences are not correlated with events in the objective world. The idea that externalist constraints are important in a complete account of what is necessary for maintaining persons and what matters in their survival is not new, but I propose my own specific account about how to understand these constraints. Furthermore, this account not only rules out fission cases but also can be used to explain our reactions to different virtual immersion scenarios. Therefore, simply on explanatory grounds alone, my view is to be preferred over pure psychological continuity theories.

#### 1. Parfit's Homework Problem

Suppose we agree with Derek Parfit that what matters in our survival as persons is not identity, but something else (1971, 1984, 1995, 1999) -- that it is coherent to describe a particular a scenario as one in which we have all that matters to us when we value our persistence over time, even though, in that particular scenario, strictly speaking, we cease to exist.<sup>1</sup>

The classic thought experiment used to illustrate this claim is the fission thought experiment, which involves a single person undergoing some process the end result of which is the creation of two distinct persons, each causally dependent upon, and qualitatively identical to, the original person, each maintaining certain relations thought to be

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Note that I am focusing exclusively on what matters in our survival as persons, but that this does not commit me to the claim that we are essentially persons -- that we would cease to exist simpliciter upon ceasing to be persons. As Parfit (1999) notes, we could think of persons as a kind of stage in our existence. While some might care only about persisting simpliciter, I maintain that there is something special about our cares about persisting *as* persons, and therefore we will be entirely focused on this latter issue.

necessary and sufficient for maintaining identity.

We can imagine, for instance, that a single person steps into a Star Trek inspired tele-transporter and that, at the intended destination, two separate people arrive, both having qualitatively identical bodies and psychologies to one another and to the original transportee. This fission scenario evokes confusion about which person, if any, maintains what matters in the survival of the previous person. The only sensible response, according to Parfit (1995), is to conclude that both fission products have what matters in survival, and this conclusion illustrates the unimportance of identity for having what matters, since two people cannot be identical to one.

Parfit's conclusion that identity does not matter in survival is unintuitive for many reasons. But, for Parfit, this conclusion is an unavoidable consequence of more basic intuitions we have about what does matter in survival, specifically, psychological continuity. And because each fission product in our scenario is fully psychologically continuous with our original transportee, we cannot consistently rule out fission cases as those in which we have what matters in our survival. At least, we cannot do so unless we can find some relevant survival-mattering property, which is absent in fission cases, but not in others. Let us call the challenge for theorists to find such a property "Parfit's homework problem."

## 2. Metaphysics and What Matters in Survival

One reason we might find Parfit's conclusion that identity is not what matters in survival problematic is that, if we accept it, the concept of what matters in survival threatens to devolve into an entirely value-laden affair, making any serious metaphysics of the nature of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> For example, Susan Wolf (1986) highlights many of the unpalatable consequences of Parfit's position on fission. She concludes that we should not allow our metaphysics of persons to determine how we value and treat persons. Instead of jettisoning the importance of metaphysical accounts of persons, I will argue that not only is fission unpalatable, but that it does, in fact, violate some of the metaphysical requirements for having what matters in survival.

persons irrelevant to the question of what matters in survival. That is, if we reject identity as what matters in survival, what in principle bars us from taking anything that matters in a life worth living as a survival-mattering property?

Intuitively, however, there is a difference between what matters in a life worth living and what matters in survival proper. To show this, consider, a person who cared deeply about the preservation of her right toe. If there is no difference between a life of value and survival, our right-toe-caring person could claim that she would cease to survive upon its removal. However, what we we should say in this case is that, for this person, a life worth living cannot be right toe-less, not that she would cease to survive upon its removal. A more intuitive example might be one in which a person believes that she would no longer be the same person if she could not pursue her career of choice. However, having a certain career is not plausibly part of what matters in survival. Instead, this particular person's belief expresses hyperbole. Really, what the person means is that her life would be valueless, not that she would cease to exist. Traditional wisdom has it that what marks this distinction is the difference between preserving identity and not, but of course, Parfitians do not have recourse to this way of drawing the distinction.

Nevertheless, there is a way of understanding the notion of what matters in survival that still gives it metaphysical bite, even if we do accept Parfitian conclusions about the importance of identity. Suppose we understand the phrase 'what matters in survival' in the following way: if a person cares that a later person has a particular property, that care counts as a care about survival just in case that property is at least one of those required to maintain that person's identity and/or their personhood over time; our cares about survival proper must be fundamentally concerned with the nature of persons, thereby vindicating the possibility of a metaphysics of persons despite Parfitian conclusions; cares about survival

must track facts about the nature of persons, though not necessarily the necessary and sufficient conditions for identity.<sup>3</sup> Other kinds of cares, the kinds of cares concerning the removal of our right toes, or the end of a particular career path, track facts about a life worth living, not what matters in survival. While this does not rule out a role for intuitions in accounts of persons tout court, it does put some much needed constraints on how they should count.<sup>4</sup> Given these constraints, we must limit ourselves, in asking about what matters in survival, only to facts about the metaphysical nature of persons.

#### 3. Psychological Continuity Theory and Parfit's Argument

The central tenets of psychological continuity theory, offered as either a theory of diachronic personal identity, or as a theory of what matters in survival, typically include the following: an earlier person has what matters in survival, or is identical to a later person, just in case that later person's mental states resemble that earlier person's adjacent mental states and that later person's current mental states causally depend upon that earlier person's mental states.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.1. Parfit's Argument for Why Identity Does not Matter

Parfit begins his argument for the claim that identity does not matter in survival with a reductive metaphysical premise that can be stated as follows: persons are constituted of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Of course this is a definition of the notion of what matters in survival alternative to other definitions. For instance, this notion is frequently defined in terms of having an egoistic concern about another person in the future. However, this way of understanding what matters in survival rules out a priori the idea that what matters is not necessarily identity, but could be something else.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Even so, it still difficult to cleanly distinguish between cares about survival and cares about a life worth living given that the correct account of the metaphysics of persons is unknown. For this reason, intuitions must be considered carefully and in tandem with multiple hypotheses about the metaphysics of persons.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> For details on problems with this view, see Shoemaker (1970) who points out problems with the causal-connectedness requirement. Also, for problems with the similarity requirement, see Duncan MacIntosh (1993).

nothing more than sequences of appropriately related psychological and physical events.<sup>6</sup> That is, facts about either psychological and/or physical continuity exhaust the nature of persons; persons are not separate entities that exist independently of these facts.

On my interpretation of the notion of what matters in survival, we should understand Parfit's reductive metaphysical premise as putting a constraint on an answer to what matters in survival. If persons are what Parfit claims they are, then there are only three appropriate options in answer to the question of what matters in survival proper: psychological continuity, bodily continuity, or both. Call this subsidiary inference the "options for what matters" premise in Parfit's argument that identity is not what matters.

The next step in Parfit's argument is to examine which of these facts, constitutive of persons, is more important in concerns about our persistence over time. Parfit argues, on the basis of a certain thought experiment, for the premise that only one of these facts truly matters to us, namely, those facts required to maintain psychological continuity.

Parfit asks us to consider the following kind of hypothetical scenario: suppose you require an operation that involves uploading your psychology to a computer in some way, destroying your brain and body, and then downloading your psychology into another body just like yours -- there will be no disruption in psychological continuity between the preoperative and post-operative beings given that your psychology will exist in some form or other throughout this process. Now many of us would have no qualms about having this operation. Intuitively, in this case, we have all that matters to us in our concern for survival.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Parfit (1999) himself is very explicit about the kind of reductionism to which he is committed, as compared to versions to which others are committed. He also presents his version of reductionism in his (1995:16). While there are other forms of reductionism available, the details of those proposals are not relevant for our purposes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> I use this digital version of Parfit's argument in order to avoid any hint of a biological criterion on what matters in survival.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Of course, some may have qualms, though as Eric Olson (2010) notes, most philosophers would not. Nevertheless, the opposing intuition does not lack merit. Indeed, there are a great number of problems with the intuition that in this case we have what matters in

But given that physical continuity is absent in this case, it cannot be this that matters; instead, it must be psychological continuity that does. We will refer to this conclusion as the "psychological continuity" premise in Parfit's larger argument that identity is not what matters in survival.

Thus far, we have established that what matters in survival is psychological continuity, but Parfit's ultimate conclusion is that identity is not what matters. Establishing this final claim relies on considering those fission cases previously mentioned. These cases illustrate that psychological continuity can be maintained twice over, thereby proving itself insufficient to maintain identity. Because of the nature of the fission scenario, a scenario in which we have what matters but we do not have identity, Parfit is driven to conclude that if what matters is psychological continuity, then what matters cannot be identity. Let us call this conditional claim in Parfit's argument the "hypothetical" premise. The hypothetical premise is, at this point, wholly supported by considerations about fission scenarios. And if this support is sound, and Parfit's other premises are true, then, on pain of inconsistency, we appear to be saddled with the conclusion that, in the fission case, what matters in survival is maintained equally as well as it is in the single implant case. If so, it follows that identity is not what matters in survival.<sup>9</sup>

survival. Bernard Williams (1999), for instance, points out that it is not clear how to even interpret these intuitions, and Johnston (2003) suggests that we should think of such a situation as simply making a copy of ourselves rather than as a case in which we have what matters in survival. Last, as Olson (1997) has been at pains to argue, a pure psychological theory of what matters in survival leads either to a repudiation of the claim that organisms can think or to the reductio that there must be two distinct, but qualitatively identical thinkers in the same place at the same time. However, my aim here is to argue that even if we grant most of Parfit's premises, we can reject that we have what matters in fission, a nice alternative for those of us who are skeptical about the claim that what matters in survival is identity, but that nevertheless still have the intuition that fission is somehow troubling.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, there are simpler ways of understanding Parfit's argument, but the way I characterize it makes immediate sense of the role of Parfit's metaphysical commitments in the argument.

#### 3.2. Fission and Q-continuity: Rejecting Identity as What Matters

Suppose we accept the first three premises of Parfit's argument that identity is not what matters -- the reductive metaphysical premise, the options for what matters premise, and the psychological continuity premise. The only way to respond to Parfit's homework problem, then, requires rejecting the last premise of his argument -- the hypothetical premise. And, in fact, there are ways of rejecting this premise.

For instance, consider the following idea: we can reject fission as showing that identity is not what matters on the grounds that fission cannot sustain what is called "genuine" psychological continuity. In contrast, we would have genuine psychological continuity in the single case. The difference, then, between the single case and the fission scenario is that in the former case, genuine psychological continuity obtains, but this fails to be true in the fission case.

The general line of reasoning is that genuine psychological continuity presupposes the ongoing identity of the subject: if I truly remember that I once visited Niagara Falls, then I must be identical to the person who originally experienced visiting Niagara Falls. <sup>10</sup> By this argument, the concept of genuine memory presupposes that the remember is identical to the subject of the memory, else the mental state in question is not an instance of a memory at all. Because, in the fission case, there is no genuine psychological continuity maintained between pre-fission and post-fission beings, we do not have what matters in these cases. <sup>11</sup> In contrast, in the single case, since it does maintain genuine psychological continuity, we do have it. Parfit's hypothetical premise then fails, because if psychological continuity is required to have what matters in survival, identity must matter as well.

The previous reasoning constitutes a solution to Parfit's homework problem in its

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> This objection was first offered by Joseph Butler (1736) against Locke (1694).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> See McDowell (1997) for a defense of this objection to psychological continuity theory.

own terms: there is a metaphysical difference, a survival-mattering difference, between the single case and the fission case that explains why we have what matters in the single case, but we do not have it in the fission case. And this reasoning ultimately rejects Parfit's argument that identity does not matter because the hypothetical premise fails; it fails because it presupposes something that is necessarily false -- that we might have psychological continuity but fail to maintain identity.

Suppose now that we grant the claim that if genuine psychological continuity matters in survival, then identity must also matter -- that Parfit's hypothetical premise, as previously stated, must be false. Even so, there is another interpretation of psychological continuity available, offered by Parfit himself in fact, an interpretation that does not rest on necessarily false presuppositions, and that can justify a revised version of the hypothetical premise.

Let us turn now to Parfit's notion of what we will call "quasi-psychological" continuity. Quasi-psychological continuity is something indistinguishable from genuine psychological continuity, even for the subject, except that it does not require the continuing identity of the person in question. What it does maintain is qualitative identity between mental states, along with causal or counterfactual dependency of later mental states on earlier mental states. Now the way is open to claim that it is not genuine psychological continuity that matters in survival, only quasi-psychological continuity. And so it is this that matters in the single transplant case. If we accept this reasoning, then Parfit is still right that identity is not what matters in survival given that genuine and quasi-psychological continuity can come apart. The revised hypothetical premise is now this: if only quasi-psychological continuity matters in survival, then identity is not what matters.

As unsettling as this might at first appear, it is plausible that, in the single case, all that one could be interested in is in maintaining is quasi-psychological continuity. For by

hypothesis, quasi-psychological continuity is qualitatively indistinguishable from genuine psychological continuity. The only clear reason that we should prefer genuine psychological continuity is that it maintains identity. This leaves our potential respondent to Parfit with the claim that the single case transplant maintains what matters in survival because genuine psychological continuity maintains identity, a reply convincing only to another identity theorist.

With the notion of quasi-psychological continuity in place, Parfit's conclusion that identity is not what matters in survival no longer depends on the argument that psychological continuity is what matters, psychological continuity allows for fission, and fission fails to maintain identity. Rather, Parfit's conclusion now simply depends on the argument that what matters is something qualitatively indistinguishable from genuine psychological continuity that does not require identity, and that nothing more could defensibly be wanted.

If we find the previous argument compelling, but still find fission troubling, there is now conceptual room to be both Parfitian about identity and yet reject that fission is acceptable. We can imagine for instance a position on which we are mere person stages connected in various ways, but not ways that preserve identity over time. My position is that we may accept such a position and still maintain that such successive person stages, while not preserving identity, must preserve a singular trajectory over time to preserve what matters. Though Parfit's homework problem is not yet resolved, doing so does not require accepting that identity matters. What it does require is revisiting his metaphysical claims about the nature of persons.

## 4. Psychological Continuity Theory and the Metaphysics of Persons

I will now turn our attention to the possibility of virtual immersion. These scenarios show that something more than simple psychological continuity is required for having what matters in survival; consideration of these kinds of scenarios identified a second condition on our continuation into the future -- an externalist condition --- which suggests a certain hypothesis about what matters.

#### 4.1. Virtual Immersion, Persons, and Objective Contexts

A particularly vivid case of virtual immersion comes from Robert Nozick (1998), which involves something he calls the "Experience Machine" -- a machine into which a person can enter that can provide her with a never-ending supply of those experiences she finds desirable. On this understanding of what constitutes virtual immersion, the choice to enter the Experience Machine would involve choosing to be a sort of solipsistic being whose experiences would only accidentally track the objective environment. This description can naturally be understood as one way in which we might realize the possibility of virtual immersion.

Notice, of course, that choosing to enter the machine does not compromise or threaten a subject's Parfitian psychological continuity. Thus, we have everything that is required for a Parfitian notion of what matters in survival. The Experience Machine, therefore, is useful in isolating what Parfit, and other pure psychological continuity theorists like Parfit, believe matters in survival.

Now despite the fact that, in entering the Experience Machine, a person would have at least a Parfitian kind of psychological continuity, many of us might have doubts about whether the mere persistence of the psychology of that particular person would count as that person having survived. Indeed, many of us, I suspect, would recoil in horror at the

possibility of entering the Experience Machine, viewing the persistence of the thing in the machine as a mere simulacrum of what that person once was, and viewing her fate in entering the machine as a fate in many ways like death.<sup>12</sup>

If this previous intuition is correct, then Parfit must be wrong about what matters in survival: being a mere continuing psychological entity is not enough for us to have what matters in our survival as persons. If a being in an Experience Machine loses her status of being a person, then, even before we begin an examination of the constraints on the nature of the diachronic identity of persons, we must first have a being who is not in a brain-in-a-vat like scenario. The Experience Machine case, then, and our reaction to it, naturally raises the question of whether our continuing identities as persons depends upon our continued existence within our given objective environments, a question often ignored by standard psychological continuity approaches.

#### 4.2. What Matters in Survival: A Hypothesis

Suppose now that continued existence within an objective context does have implications for a theory of what matters in survival. That is, let us adopt, as a working hypothesis, John McDowell's dictum that persons can be understood as such only within the objective context in which they participate (1997) -- that it is a necessary condition on having persons at all that they exist within and track their objective contexts. If we suppose this is correct, we must now ask about its implications for a theory of a person's survival over time.

One hypothesis, based on our previous requirement, is that, in addition to all of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Of course the horror is not directed at what it would be like to be in the machine, but at the prospect of entering the machine altogether. This horror need not be taken as a worry about ourselves as persons in the machine, since I can easily regard the event of entering the machine with horror without taking an attitude to the being that exists in the machine after that event. After all, for many of us, the prospect of death is horrifying, but this horror, arguably, is not had because we are worried about what will happen to us after that event. We fear the event itself because it entails the end of our existence. Likewise, my explanation for why we regard the event of entering the Experience Machine with horror is that it entails the cessation of our personhood.

standard Parfitian psychological requirements, there are also some externalist constraints on a person's survival over time. <sup>13</sup> This hypothesis is as follows: the externalist constraints on diachronic identity, or at least having what matters with respect to it, require the continued living of a life, which can be thought of as the continuation of a "life trajectory," defined as the continuous path of a psychological subject through an objective context, a path created and maintained by the subject's being appropriately related to that environment. <sup>14</sup> In order to have what matters in survival, a psychological subject must have not only psychologically continuity over time, her life trajectory must likewise continue.

Adopting the life trajectory view involves accepting two requirements on maintaining what matters in survival: first, to have what matters there must be quasi-psychological continuity between earlier and later psychological subjects; second, certain extrinsic properties of those earlier and later psychological subjects must also continue to quasi-hold. Before defining what is required for an extrinsic property to quasi-hold over time, we will first look at the nature of a life trajectory in more detail, the nature of an extrinsic property.

### 5. Life Trajectories as What Matter in Survival

The life trajectory hypothesis, rather than ignoring a subject's relations to her environment, incorporates the insight that external relations are important in an account of what matters in survival. This is because the conditions required to continue a life trajectory involve the continued holding, or more accurately the quasi-holding, of certain extrinsic properties by a psychological subject over time.

## **5.1. The Nature of Life Trajectories**

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Of course, this does not follow deductively in any sense. It is merely a correlative hypothesis suggested by the idea that existing within an objective context matters to us in our continued existence as persons.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> See Peter Strawson's (1966) for a similar characterization of persons, though I differ from Strawson in my commitments about what counts as existence within an objective context.

From an intuitive point of view, a person's life involves facts about a psychological subject and her relations to an objective environment over time. These facts will individuate a person's life trajectory. For example, my life is the life of a psychological subject related to her father as his first born child, a fact that individuates the beginning of my life trajectory as well as continuing to individuate it in virtue of my continuing to have that extrinsic property over time. My life is also the life of a person that includes a multitude of biographical facts, some current, others historical. For instance, my city of birth was Yorkton, and I am the sometimes reluctant owner of four cats named respectively "Simba-lou," "Bazooness," "Pinto Bianca," and "Rhubarb." I am also the sole author of this paper. All of these facts individuate my life trajectory. Of course, similar kinds of facts individuate every other person's trajectory. Life trajectories are individuated in the same way we might think the trajectory of any other object is individuated.

#### 5.2. Extrinsic Properties and Quasi-continuity

Extrinsic properties come in different flavours: temporary, long-standing, and permanent.

Respective examples of these kinds of extrinsic properties include: my now having the property of drinking a cup of coffee; my now having the property of owning my four cats; and my now having the properties of being my father's only first born child, and of being the sole author of this paper.

The previous examples of my extrinsic properties are held in virtue of facts about my relations to my environment. However, while the first two kinds of extrinsic properties are dependent upon my occurrent external relations, the third kind are not so dependent.

Instead, the third kind depend merely on their having originated in relations between myself and an objective environment. Speaking more abstractly, the fact that some of a subject's extrinsic properties do not depend on the occurrent existence of the relata, in virtue of which

she has that extrinsic property, explains why once one has acquired these kinds of properties, they are held permanently. For instance, a person like myself is still the first born child of my parents long after they have died, and I continue to be the author of this paper even if it, and all of its instantiations, are destroyed.

Of course, if what is being offered as a criterion on what matters for survival is that the extrinsic properties of a psychological subject must be genuinely held by an candidate continuer of that subject, then this proposal would simply presuppose the continued persistence of the identity of a psychological subject, just as the concept of genuine psychological continuity does. But we will here rely on Parfit's previous notion quasicontinuation, and apply it to the continued holding of extrinsic properties.

Speaking loosely, let us say that psychological subject B quasi-continues subject A's extrinsic properties just in case subject B can conduct herself with respect to the world and herself in exactly the way subject A could have conducted herself had subject B strictly survived as subject A. More precisely, in order for a later subject B to be quasi-continuous with an earlier subject A, she must meet two separate conditions. To count as having what matters in subject A's survival, subject B must maintain what will be called the "form and character" of subject A's extrinsic properties.

The form requirement on the quasi-continuity of extrinsic properties is as follows:

A subject B quasi-continues subject A's extrinsic properties with respect to their forms only if subject B can be ascribed the very same extrinsic properties in the same permanent or temporary forms in which subject A had them.

For instance, a subject B quasi-has a permanent property in the same form as subject A had that property just in case subject B can be ascribed that very same property in its current form, so that if the subject of a life trajectory has certain permanent extrinsic properties, she will always have them currently, and therefore any candidate continuer must

also be able to currently quasi-have them. In contrast with permanent extrinsic properties, the form requirement for temporary extrinsic properties, given their temporary nature, requires only that subject B can be said to have once had those very same temporary properties as subject A previously had.

The character requirement, the second requirement on the quasi-continuity of extrinsic properties, takes this form:

A subject B quasi-continues another subject A's extrinsic properties with respect to their characters only if subject B can be ascribed those very same extrinsic properties that subject A had in a way qualitatively indistinguishable from the way in which subject A previously had those properties.

This second requirement is somewhat vaguer than the first, in the same way that the similarity requirement for psychological continuity is vague. Nevertheless, it is still a notion with some intuitive content. The character of a property involves certain ways of being in the world. A candidate continuer B quasi-continues the character of an extrinsic property of subject A's just in case subject B can act with respect to herself and the outside world in the very same way that subject A could have acted with respect to herself and the outside world in virtue of having had that property. Regarding the character requirement on temporary properties, a similar analysis applies as applied in the case of maintaining the form of an extrinsic property: subject B would merely have to be able to act as if she had once had that property, not as if she still has it, unlike she would have to be able to do with respect to subject A's permanent extrinsic properties.<sup>15</sup>

To make these conditions more concrete, let us look at an example in which a later psychological subject B quasi-continues the extrinsic properties of an earlier subject A.

Imagine that I, subject A, am in a car accident. Someone calls my father and tells him that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> While the character requirement is somewhat vague, as is the similarity requirement in psychological continuity theories, there is this difference: the quasi-continuation of temporary extrinsic properties can allow for massive differences in a subject's temporary extrinsic properties without thereby losing what matters in survival.

his child was fatally injured, but not to worry, they cloned her body and saved her psychology on a very sophisticated computer. The psychology stored on this computer has now been downloaded into to the cloned body's brain. Someone on the phone tells my father that his daughter, subject B, is really anxious to see him. Despite the fact that, at least for many identity theorists, my identity is destroyed in this case, the replacement for me can act as my father's only first born child just as well as I could have had I not had the accident, both with respect to herself and my father. In this case, subject B's extrinsic properties are quasi-continuous with subject A's extrinsic properties, sustaining both the form and character of subject A's extrinsic properties. According to the life trajectory view, it is therefore possible to have what matters in survival insofar as we have both quasi-psychological continuity and quasi-continuity with respect to an subject's extrinsic properties.

#### 6. Applications: Fission and Virtual Immersion

Because all that is required for maintaining what matters in survival on the life trajectory view is the quasi-continuation of a subject's psychology and extrinsic properties within an objective context, it is a view that does not require maintaining a subject's identity in order to have what matters in survival. In this sense, the view is thoroughly Parfitian. However, despite the fact that the life trajectory view is not an identity theory, it is still a view that will prove to rule out fission as a case in which we have what matters. The solution to Parfit's homework problem lies in the differences between the extrinsic properties fission products can quasi-continue as compared to the single case. Furthermore, as we will see, the view being offered can explain our intuitions about the Experience Machine, as well as other

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> This is true despite the fact that the clone does not actually have my extrinsic properties since this would require identity preservation, and it is true even though the clone itself will have different permanent extrinsic properties true of it: such as having a different birth date, or what have you, than I have.

intuitions we might have about other kinds of cases of virtual immersion.

#### 6.1. Fission Scenarios

Of course, even on the life trajectory view, the reason we do not have what matters in fission cannot be because it threatens the continued holding of more temporary kinds of extrinsic properties, since these are properties that come and go, that begin to hold and cease to hold of a subject all the time, even in the single case. Given the requirements on the quasi-continuity for temporary extrinsic properties — that any candidate continuer must be able to claim only that she once had them and be able to so conduct herself — a fission product can arguably sustain continuity for temporary properties and so cannot be distinguished on these grounds from non-fission products. With respect to temporary extrinsic properties, then, in principle, nothing is threatened in fission that could not also be threatened in the single case; fission threatens neither the form nor the character of such properties.

However, despite the ability of fission products to quasi-continue a previous subject's temporary extrinsic properties, the requirements on the quasi-continuity of other kinds of extrinsic properties do distinguish fission cases from non-fission cases. In particular, the requirements for the continued holding of those extrinsic properties that are independent of occurrent relations to the environment, those that are had permanently by a psychological subject, cannot be satisfied by fission products. This is because, while both fission products have an equal metaphysical claim to be the continuers of a fission ancestor's life trajectory, and therefore to be the quasi-bearers of its permanent extrinsic properties, for many of these properties, it is logically impossible for both fission products to quasi-have them.

Let us explore first why fission products cannot maintain the form of certain permanent extrinsic properties. Consider the property of my being a first-born child: if I

fission, the resultant fission products would both be psychological subjects related in certain ways to my previous incarnation as a being who had this property. But, in this case, because both fission products have an equal metaphysical claim on my extrinsic properties, and because only one thing at a time can be someone's only first-born child, neither of the fission products can currently quasi-have the property of being my father's first-born child; the form of this property is threatened. True, both are psychologically continuous with something that once was my father's first-born child, not something just anyone can claim. But having once been my father's first-born child no more quasi-continues the extrinsic property of being my father's first-born child than would merely having once had all of my memories quasi-continue my psychology. Therefore, in this particular case, neither fission product can satisfy what is required to maintain what matters in survival.

Let us now turn to exploring why fissioning threatens the character of certain permanent extrinsic properties. This time, let us consider the example of my being the sole author of this paper. Suppose I fission. Of course, neither of the fission-products can be said to be the sole author of the paper, since there are now two continuers. But it might be thought that both of them can be continuers of me in virtue of the fact that both of them, like me, have a kind of authorial status -- in their case, the status of being an author, or perhaps, of being a co-author. Thus, both fission products sustain my necessarily permanent authorial status; they sustain its form of being permanent and therefore can be said to continue me.

Unfortunately, the previous move is defeated by consideration of the character of the property in question. I originally had authorial status by having a property with the character of sole authorship, and this entails conducting myself in certain ways. For instance, as a sole author, I will take sole credit for the ideas contained within the paper. In contrast, the

fission products could be said to have authorial status only by having something like the property of being a co-author, and the character of that property is strikingly different from the character of the property of being a sole author; if I am a co-author, I do not take full credit for the ideas contained within the paper, and neither do I have any of the other typical properties of being a sole author. For these reasons, either we cannot appropriately ascribe to the fission products the property of being authors of the paper and the form requirement is threatened, or the fission products, in being ascribed such a property, in lieu of being ascribed the property of being a sole author, would violate the character requirement. Since we have what matters in my survival only if we have continuity with respect to both the form and character of my permanent extrinsic properties, and fission products maintain only one or the other of these forms of quasi-continuity, but not both, they fail to maintain what matters in survival.

As we have seen, then, at best, fission products can maintain only the past tense or the shared counterparts of permanent extrinsic properties, neither of which counts as maintaining their form and character. 17 For this reason, fissioning fails the requirements for the continuation of a life trajectory. 18

#### 6.2. Virtual Immersion Scenarios

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Why isn't the character condition enough? Well, let us consider fission products: it seems that fission products could not act in a way qualitatively indistinguishable from me with regards to being my father's first born child, since there would now be two people serving as my father's first born instead of one, and surely that would change the character of my previous relation to my father, whether he is still in existence or not. It might appear, then, that the form requirement is doing no work in my theory. But now suppose that one of the fission products is sent to another inhabitable planet, never to be seen again. In this case, the fission product left behind could maintain the character of my extrinsic property of being my father's first-born child, but still could not maintain its form.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Perry (1976) also raises the issue of whether having certain properties, for him, those properties that relate me to my past, are special in an account of personal identity, since no one but me could have those properties. Ultimately, Perry thinks that this is not a consideration in favor of an identity theory of persons. And, I agree, though I do think that

Now that we have seen that we cannot have what matters in survival in fission, I now turn to some intuitions about cases of virtual immersion. As it turns out, the life trajectory view can quite nicely explain and predict a range of intuitions about various forms of virtual immersion, better in fact than the psychological continuity theorist can.

In the Experience Machine case, we imagined the horror and anxiety we would feel about the possibility of being immersed in a world in which our experiences were entirely solipsistic and de-correlated with facts about an objective context. The explanation for this horror was that, in such a scenario, we lost what mattered in survival due to our lack of being appropriately connected to an objective context.

But now, instead, consider the anticipation we might feel if all psychological subjects could rid themselves of the shackles of bodily decay by immersing their psychologies within a virtual world, a world that could maintain their psychologies independently of their bodies. Suppose that, somehow, our bodies become obsolete. We can imagine a scenario like that which occurs in the movie *The Matrix* with the exception, of course, that everyone is a willing and eager participant. Or, perhaps, we can imagine the kinds of scenarios presented in the novel *Snow Crash*, or less well-known, we can imagine the kinds of depictions of the nature of being virtually immersed presented in the movie *eXistenZ*. Our initial attitudes to these possibilities, possibilities in which we have a chance to escape from our aging, dying biological bodies, might appear to support the intuitions of the psychological continuity theorist, since surely we would not view these scenarios as constituting the end of our existence. Indeed, we would, and probably should, look forward to them as eliminating the inevitability of death, as a way of achieving immortality.

However, whether these previous intuitions vindicate psychological continuity theory

certain kinds of extrinsic properties, those permanent properties that could be had only by one person, not necessarily by me, are important for having what matters in survival.

depends upon what it means for a psychological subject to exist within an objective context. Earlier, we supposed that our reaction to the Experience Machine, and our reaction to being virtually immersed, should be one of horror. Yet, as just noted, we might also think of the possibility of virtual immersion as ensuring our immortality. The explanation for the conflict between these two intuitions is that each intuition depends on different imaginings of details being virtually immersed, on different understandings of what it means to exist within, and track, an objective context.

Our natural assumption, of course, is to identify an objective context with the spatio-temporal world. But this assumption might be rejected if technology advances to the point of allowing for purely virtual interactions. After all, the notion of objectivity does not itself necessarily involve physicality, at least, not without argument. We could have a purely virtual objective environment in which there were shared experiences of that virtual environment together with the ability to affect that shared environment in certain predictable and systematic ways. If this is how we should understand immersion within a virtual environment, then we might still reasonably ascribe extrinsic properties to subjects in these kinds of contexts.

It turns out, then, that the intuition that virtual immersion might be a way of achieving immortality is not ruled out by my view. In fact, my view supports this intuition. Only a solipsistic existence in which the experiences of a subject are merely illusory relative to an objective context would constitute the cessation of something that properly matters to us in our survival as persons. The life trajectory view, then, is congruent with the horror we experience when contemplating these kinds of possibilities.

The previous scenarios illustrate that the life trajectory view is to be preferred over the psychological continuity theory, because it can accommodate our intuitions about both ways of being virtually immersed. The psychological continuity view does not do so, because on the psychological continuity view, both ways of being virtually immersed would equally maintain what matters in survival, contrary to our intuitions.

#### 7. Objections

One objection to my argument against Parfit is that he himself was never committed to the claim that there would be no differences between the fission case and the single case such that we might not prefer a singular existence over fissioning. That is, Parfit's homework problem is not merely to find a difference between the cases. Rather, in order to refute Parfit, we would have to demonstrate not only that fission is less preferable to a singular existence, but that we view our fate in fissioning as equivalent to death. And, of course, I have not shown this, only that there is a difference between the cases. It might seem, then, that I have said nothing that Parfit couldn't agree with.

But this way of thinking about Parfit's homework problem fails to distinguish between caring about what matters in survival and caring about a life worth living. Of course, Parfit can agree that there might be aspects of a life worth living absent in the fission case that are not absent in the single case. Recall, however, that Parfit's homework problem was to find a survival-mattering difference, a metaphysical difference, between fission cases and the single case. And Parfit cannot recognize survival-mattering differences between fission and non-fission cases. Once we recognize that a survival-mattering difference is one that entails metaphysical differences between fission cases and single cases, we can see that there is a deep disagreeement between myself and Parfit. I am not merely claiming that the stuff of a life worth living is missing in fission cases, but that there are metaphysical differences between cases of fission and non-fission, differences that have to do with the nature of personhood.

In other words, even if Parfit can recognize differences between fission and the single case, given his metaphysical commitments, those differences cannot amount to survival-mattering differences, since for Parfit, there are no facts about the constitution of persons that such intuitions could be tracking. As I understand it, Parfit's homework problem is precisely to find a survival-mattering difference between fission and the single case that he himself could not find given his commitments about the metaphysics of persons. So the answer to this objection is simply to note that Parfit cannot simply agree with my arguments, since Parfit himself could not recognize a survival-mattering difference between fission and non-fission, and I can and do.

A second objection to the view offered is that it is just simply false that there are any permanent extrinsic properties; all of our extrinsic properties are contingent upon subsequent events. For instance, I may begin life with the extrinsic property of being my father's only child, but lo and behold, 10 years later, after the birth of my sister, the property of being my father's only child is lost.

While the previous objection has merit, it strikes me as putting the cart before the horse. That is, it seems to me, at least, that in order for us to agree that there are no permanent extrinsic properties, we already have to accept fission as a possible way of surviving. For instance, there is simply no other kind of event, besides my death or fission, that could possibly change the extrinsic property of being my father's first born child. To argue that because fission could change this property, and that therefore there are no such properties, is already to accept fission as a way of surviving, and this is something many find unintuitive.

# 8. Concluding Remarks

To summarize, on my view, three conditions must be met in order for us to have what

matters in survival. First, a person's psychology must continue in the extended sense meant by Parfit. Second, for a psychological subject to count as a person at all, she must exist within, and track, an objective context. For this reason, the topic of a person's persistence, or the topic of what matters in the survival of that person, must be concerned with those psychological subjects that exist within and track objective contexts. Third, in order to maintain what matters in a particular person's survival over time, that person's life trajectory must too survive, and this involves the quasi-continuation of a subject's extrinsic properties, found to involve the satisfaction of two further requirements: the form and character requirements.

Contra Parfit, there is a kind of property absent fission cases that is required for us to have what matters in survival. Nevertheless, it is not the kind of property that entails an identity criterion for having what matters. We can, therefore, maintain a Parfitian stance on the importance of identity, but reject taking his stance on fission cases. As we saw, the kind of property missing in the fission case is a kind of extrinsic property whose importance becomes clear in the context of considering certain thought experiments concerning ways of being virtually immersed. And, as we also saw, the life trajectory view offered rules out fission cases as those in which we have what matters, as well as justifying our conflicting intuitions about different ways we might be virtually immersed.

Note that I am not defending the claim that the continued holding or quasi-holding of permanent extrinsic properties is something that we might intuitively believe matters in survival. Rather, the argument is that it is a consequence of caring about survival that we must too care about these properties. By introducing the Experience Machine case, I tried to establish that there is something we care about, namely, maintaining our connection to an objective context, and I suggested that this care was indicative of a fact about the

metaphysics of persons -- that it is a care that indicates something about what matters in survival. I then conjectured, but of course did not deduce, a particular account of what matters in the quasi-continuation of diachronic identity, an account that required the continued quasi-holding of certain extrinsic properties over time.

The life trajectory view is justified because, in addition to explaining our troubled relationship to fission cases, it also explains the different reactions that we, as psychological subjects, have to different ways of understanding the possibility of virtual immersion. This further illustrates the explanatory power of, and therefore further confirms, the view being proposed. Some possibilities, those where our existing within, and tracking of, an objective context can be maintained, we excitedly anticipate, exactly as my theory predicts we should. Others, such as those where we are solipsistic subjects misrepresenting the facts of the objective environment, as we are in the Experience Machine, should rightly be viewed as threatening what matters most to us in our survival — the continuation of our life trajectories over time.<sup>19</sup>

SUNY Geneseo

## **Bibliography**

Butler, Joseph. (1975) "Of Personal Identity." In *Personal Identity*. Ed. John Perry. University of California Press. Originally published in 1736.

Cronenberg, David (Producer & Director). (1999). *eXistenZ* [Motion Picture]. Alliance Atlantis Communications et al.

Garrett, Brian. (1998.) Personal Identity and Self-Consciousness. London: Routledge.

Hudson, Hud. (2001). A Materialist Metaphysics of the Human Person. Cornell University

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Special thanks to John G. Bennett, Peter Carruthers, Ted Everett, Jeff Horty, Peter Ludlow, Duncan MacIntosh, Raymond Martin, Eric Olson, John Perry, Paul Pietroski, Georges Rey, and Allen Stairs for comments on drafts in progress. Thanks also to Derek Parfit for sharing his work in progress on the topic. More thanks are due also to audiences at the 2010 Personal Identity, their Embodiments and Environments Workshop, the 2004 Canadian Philosophical Association meeting, as well as audiences at the Dalhousie Philosophy Colloquium Series.

Press.

Johnston, Mark. (2003) "Human Concerns without Superlative Selves." *Personal Identity*. Eds. Raymond Martin and John Barresi. Blackwell Publishing. ------ (1987). "Human Beings." *Journal of Philosophy* 84: 59–83

Korsgaard, Christine M. (2003). "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit." *Personal Identity*. Eds. Raymond Martin and John Barresi. Blackwell Publishing.

Lewis, David. (1983). "Survival and Identity." *Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. 55-78.

Locke, John. (1975). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Ed. Peter Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Originally published in 1694.

MacIntosh, Duncan. (1993). "Persons and the Satisfaction of Preferences: Problems in the Rational Kinematics of Value." *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.XC, No.4. 163-80.

McDowell, John. (1997). "Reductionism and the First-Person." *Reading Parfit.* Ed. Jonathan Dancy. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. 230-250.

Nagel, T. (1986). *The View from Nowhere*. Oxford University Press. Noonan, Harold W. (2003). *Personal Identity, Second Edition*. London: Routledge.

Nozick, Robert. (1998). "The Experience Machine." *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. Ed. Louis Pojman. Wadsworth Publishing Co. 152-53. ------. (1981). *Philosophical Explanations*. Harvard University Press

Olson, Eric. T. (2010). "Personal Identity." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Ed.

Edward N. Zalta. http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/identity-personal. ----- (1997). *The Human Animal: Personal Identity without Psychology.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Parfit, Derek. (1999) "Experiences, Subjects, and Conceptual Schemes." *Philosophical Topics*, 26 (1/2):217-70.

-----. (1995). "The Unimportance of Identity." *Identity*. Ed. Henry Harris. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 13-45.

-----. (1984). Reasons and Persons. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

-----. (1971). "Personal Identity." The Philosophical Review 80: 3-65.

Perry, John. (1976). "The Importance of Being Identical." Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *The Identities of Persons*. University of California Press.

-----. (1972). "Can the Self Divide?" Journal of Philosophy 69: 463–488.

Shoemaker, Sydney. (1984). "Personal Identity: A Materialist's Account." Personal Identity.

Eds. Sydney Shoemaker and Richard Swinburne. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Limited. 67-132. -----. (1970). "Persons and their Pasts." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7. 269-285.

Stephenson, Neal. (2000). Snow Crash. Spectra.

Strawson, Peter. (1966). The Bounds of Sense. London: Methuen.

Unger, Peter. (1990). *Identity, Consciousness, and Value*. Oxford University Press.

Silver, Joel (Producer), & Wachowski, Andy & Lana (Directors). (1999). *The Matrix* [Motion Picture]. Warner Bros. Pictures.

Wiggins, David. (1980). Sameness and Substance. Oxford: Blackwell.

Williams, Bernard. (1999). "The Self and The Future." *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings, Third Edition*. Eds. Michael Bratman and John Perry. Oxford University Press: New York, Oxford.

Wolf, Susan. (1986). "Self-Interest and Interest in Selves." Ethics 96(4): 704-720.