

5. Simple subjects, the first-person-perspective and persistence

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1. The “complex” vs. “simple” distinction

The distinction between “the complex view” and “the simple view” was introduced by Parfit for classifying contrasting accounts of the nature of personal identity. Parfit identified the complex view with reductionism according to which “personal identity over time just consists in the holding of certain other facts. It consists in various kinds of psychological continuity, of memory, character, intention, and the like, which in turn rest upon bodily continuity.”¹

In his *Reasons and Persons* Parfit ascribes a reductionist account to anyone who holds

- (i) that the fact of a person’s identity over time just consists in the holding of more particular facts,

and

- (ii) that these facts can be described without either presupposing the identity of this person, or explicitly claiming that experiences in this person’s life are had by this person, or even explicitly claiming that this person exists.²

Clause (ii) claims that these more particular facts can be described in an impersonal way. Describing the experiencing of a certain event by a person P1 at t1 and the occurrence of an apparent memory of such an event by a person P2 at t2 – where the memory is caused by the original event in virtue of the normal processes generated in a human person’s visual and nervous system – neither explicitly refers to personal identity between P1 and P2 nor invokes any commitment that P1 and P2 exist, ontologically speaking. It suffices to construe P1 and P2 as terms

¹ Parfit 1982, 227.

² Parfit 1984, 210.

referring to the loci where the relevant events and processes determining personal identity ought to be located.³

Proponents of the simple view, instead, hold that personal identity does not consist in any form of psychological and/or physical continuity but represents a separate “further fact”. Swinburne, for instance, says:

I stated the simple view as the view that personal identity is not constituted by continuities of mental or physical properties or of the physical stuff (that is, matter) of which persons are made, but is a separate feature of the world from any of the former.⁴

He goes on and argues that this claim does not deny that personal identity possibly holds in virtue of the continued existence of a non-physical part of the human person, such as the immaterial soul. If substance dualism is the view that the human person is a composite of body and soul, the body being a contingent and the soul being a necessary feature of the human person, then specific physical and mental properties are not necessary for a human person’s continuous existence. Rather, it is the continued existence of the human person’s soul. Swinburne invites us to imagine the following scenario in support of this view: Instead of our world W1, there exists another world W2 which is exactly the same as W1 with the only difference that instead of a human person P1 who lives a certain life in W1, there is another human person P2 in W2 who shares all bodily, physical and mental properties with P1, but nevertheless is not P1. W2 appears to be a metaphysical possibility. It seems to be possible that in another world a person exists having my physical and mental properties and living the life I am living in this world but still not being me. According to Swinburne, this thought-experiment suggests that P1 and P2 must have different parts. Since their physical parts are the same, the difference must lie in having not the same non-physical parts, that is, in having different immaterial parts such as souls, which account for P1’s and P2’s continued personal existence.

Surprisingly, Swinburne’s account seems to meet Parfit’s clause (i): Personal identity over time just consists in the holding of a more particular fact – the continued existence of a person’s soul. And it seems

³ It is, of course, a contested issue whether such an impersonal description is successful after all. For a critical view on this question see, for instance, Hornsby 2000.

⁴ Swinburne 2012, 120.

to meet Parfit's clause (ii) as well: The continued existence of a person's soul seems to be describable from an impersonal point of view. If one is able to trace the soul's continued existence, no reference to the person having this soul is required in addition.

This result is rather surprising for Swinburne's account generally is taken as paradigmatic of the simple view. At this point two options come to mind: Either Parfit's proposal of the reductionist account needs some refinement or one is not going to characterize the simple view in terms of (immaterial) parts.

Taking the first route one may suggest that the particular facts in which personal identity consists in do not fall outside the ken of the natural sciences. The fact of a person's identity over time just consists in the holding of facts, which are in principle completely describable by complete theories of natural science. Thus, immaterial souls, spiritual matter or subtle ethereal beings by definition fall outside Parfit's understanding of particular facts.

Taking the second route suggests that no additional *part* of any kind but an ontological feature of an altogether different kind represents the watershed between complex and simple accounts. Subjectivity appears to be a suitable candidate. In his paper "Physicalism" Thomas Nagel states:

The feeling is that I (and hence any "I") cannot be a mere physical object, because I possess my mental states: I am their *subject* in a way in which no physical object can possibly be the subject of its attributes. I have a type of internality which physical things lack [...]⁵

And he continues:

The feeling that physicalism leaves out of account the essential subjectivity of psychological states is the feeling that nowhere in the description of the state of the human body could there be room for a physical equivalent of the fact that I (or any self), and not just that body, am the subject of those states.⁶

The claim is that any objective or external description of reality will necessarily exclude subjects of experience. Swinburne's thought-experiment ultimately aims at a similar thrust⁷, but reference to a person's immaterial part fails to highlight that a complete description

⁵ Nagel 1965, 353.

⁶ Nagel 1965, 354.

⁷ For Swinburne the soul's essential property is the capacity to be conscious.

of a person – her life, her bodily and psychological characteristics and her mental states – does not touch the fact that *I* am this person, that *I* experience this body as *my* body and these mental states as *my* mental states. Reference to parts, material or immaterial, remains stuck within a third-person perspective that is unable to grasp the fact that *I* have a direct awareness of myself as a subject of experience. This internality, as Nagel calls it, will not appear in any externalist description of reality. Consequently, any externalist or, as Parfit calls it, impersonal description misses to take the existence of subjects of experience into account.

The suggestion proposed in this paper is, then, that a delineation of simple from complex views is best drawn if the further fact at which the simple view appeals to is spelled out in terms of a subject of experience and its particular nature which evades any objective and impersonal perspective. I will elaborate this suggestion further in the next paragraph where I am going to present prominent accounts of the simple view in more detail. I will argue that the focal point of these accounts is the subjective perspective.

2. The special ontological status of subjects of experience

Geoffrey Madell, Martine Nida-Rümelin and Lynne Rudder Baker have all proposed versions of the simple view. Though considerable differences exist within their accounts, I will show that they share as a central common denominator the view that the subjective perspective is the further fact which guarantees persistence.

Madell's starting point is Bertrand Russell's distinction between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance.⁸ Russell notes that knowing a description and knowing that there is an object falling under this description does not imply that the object itself is directly known to us. If I say that a table is a physical object with a determinate causal history and that it is able to cause such and such, then I am describing the table in a certain way (as a physical object, as having a specific causal history, as being a cause). Making such a complex description does not entail the claim that there exists as well an object being equivalent to this description, that is, a table as such.

⁸ Russell 1912, chap. V.

Knowledge by acquaintance, instead, signifies a kind of knowledge about something “of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths.”⁹ If a table stands before me, then I am acquainted with the sense-data composing the appearance of mine that a table stands before me. These sense-data about the table are “immediately known to me just as they are.”¹⁰ In the further course of his analysis Russell discusses the issue whether we are also acquainted with the subject acquiring this knowledge by acquaintance. Though he is cautious in coming to a definite conclusion, he asserts that being acquainted with a sense-datum obviously involves also self-acquaintance. Russell writes:

It is hard to see how we could know this truth, or even understand what is meant by it, unless we were acquainted with something which we call ‘I’.¹¹

This observation highlights that without any direct internal awareness of myself I wouldn’t be in a position to tell that a specific description applies to me and not to someone else. There is a gap in principle between a complete description of my existence in terms of history and bodily and mental properties, and the insight that it is myself that is described in this way. From these considerations one may draw the conclusion that there is a further fact that defies any positive description and this further fact can be identified with a self being a simple unanalyzable entity.¹² Madell uses these ideas in his in-depth analysis of the first person.¹³ To say of a set of properties that it is mine implies more than that this set of properties is instantiated. It means that the relation of “mine-ness” of this set of properties involves as well the knowledge that I am aware of myself. Thus, this kind of knowledge is distinct from the knowledge that there is this set of properties instantiated. Remember Swinburne’s thought experiment in favor of his soul-account of the simple view. If there is indeed first-personal knowledge about a property being mine, then it is also possible to imagine – at least in terms of an extreme abstraction – myself without

⁹ Russell 1912, 26.

¹⁰ Russell 1912, 26.

¹¹ Russell 1912, 26.

¹² For instance, McTaggart 1927, chap. XXXVI, argues that Russell’s analysis leads directly to the view that the self must be simple.

¹³ See Madell 1981, chap. 2. In short, he proposes to consider the “I” as an unanalyzable, non-eliminable referential term which logically is a proper name.

any of the properties being mine right now. The reason for this lays not in the fact that an immaterial soul is an essential part of the human person but in the fact that the knowledge of these properties ought not to be conflated with the knowledge that *I* am the one having them. The connection between knowing that there is a person instantiating a certain set of properties and knowing that this person is myself is a purely contingent matter. However, knowing the latter is to know a further fact over and above knowing the former.

A similar line of reasoning employs also Martina Nida-Rümelin when ascribing a “non-descriptive nature” to conscious beings.¹⁴ She distinguishes non-conscious from conscious entities on the basis of the following conceivability claim: Imagine that there is a stone, ST, sitting on your desk and that there is a situation with a perfect counterpart of ST. That is, the counterpart-stone, CST, consists of the same physical particles arranged in the same way, has the same causal history, sits at the same place and displays the same causal features. If one wonders whether in such a situation it is metaphysically possible that all these conditions are satisfied but ST still does not exist, then one has a hard time to point out why this should be so. The claim is that we cannot sensibly conceive of any additional feature, which might justify the view that in the described situation CST exists but ST does not. Were this to be the case, CST would have to be distinct from ST but we do not seem to have any good reason to assume the existence of a further hidden feature being instantiated in CST but not ST. This insight is characteristic for all non-conscious, that is, purely material entities. Therefore, we have no good reason to assume that non-conscious entities do not have a non-descriptive individual nature. There is, in other words, a complete description available for them.

When it comes to conscious entities, however, things appear to be different. According to Nida-Rümelin we seem to

“understand the description of a case where someone is a perfect counterpart of you and still you never came into existence.”¹⁵

The difference between the situation concerning a stone and its counter-part and a conscious being and its counter-part lies in the fact that in the former case we cannot make sense of a possible difference between the two entities involved but in the latter case we obviously can

¹⁴ Nida-Rümelin 2012.

¹⁵ Nida-Rümelin 2012, 167.

do so. We are able to understand that someone else unlike me could have existence instead of me if conditions might have been slightly different. If someone else could have it, then it is likely to assume that a qualitative identical individual could have it as well. If this were the case, then we can grasp what this would amount to. The coming into existence of a perfect counter-part instead of me means that I, tragically, never come into existence. There is no one experiencing the world from my first-person-perspective but someone else experiencing it from hers. This difference in existence is clear, intelligible and of central existential importance. We are able to imagine a world where my counter-part could exist but not myself. And we have a clear conceptual understanding what the difference between me and my perfect counter-part's existence would consist in.

Nida-Rümelin highlights that these and similar thought-experiments point at something essential about our thinking of being a subject of experience. It indicates that subjects of experience are a kind of entity with respect to which it is not only appropriate to take a first-person-perspective but this perspective alone provides us access to a subject's non-descriptive individual nature. This is so because by being an experiencing subject we have a direct awareness of what it is to be such a subject. We know this "by acquaintance" and a careful reflection of this knowledge uncovers the nature of the entity known in this way. Nida-Rümelin writes:

Our implicit notion of what it is to be a conscious individual is based on the special kind of access we have to what it is to be a conscious individual by *being* a conscious individual.¹⁶

In other words, the uncovering of the proper nature of a subject of experience can only be done "from within". Only as a subject of experience I am enjoying the required first-person-perspective allowing me to grasp the special status of subjects of experience. In virtue of one's first-person-perspective one is able to "see" why subjects of experience are, metaphysically speaking, fundamentally different from all entities without any conscious life and why a complete description of the properties being instantiated by a particular entity is unable to take this special status into account.

A third account highlighting the importance of the first-person-perspective for an adequate understanding of ourselves and other

¹⁶ Nida-Rümelin 2012, 176.

conscious beings is Lynne Rudder Baker's constitution view. Baker distinguishes between a rudimentary and a robust form of first-person-perspective. A rudimentary form of first-person-perspective is ascribable to any conscious being for it

has a certain perspective on its surroundings with itself as the "origin."¹⁷

The hallmark of any first-person-perspective is that it is perspectival, that is, it is the access towards reality of someone.

A robust first-person-perspective involves the additional capacity that a subject is able to think of itself as itself. It is not enough that someone distinguishes between oneself and other entities but one must also be able to grasp conceptually this distinction. Baker writes:

It is not just to have thoughts expressible by means of 'I,' but also to conceive of oneself as the bearer of those thoughts.¹⁸

Having a robust first-person-perspective implies to have the ability to think of one's perspective as one's own and to think of others as having different perspectives from one's own. Thus, anyone enjoying a robust first-person-perspective has the ability to conceive of other entities as different from itself.

In the light of the previous reflections put forward by Madell and Nida-Rümelin it is not hard to see why also Baker's account is an example of the simple view. Having a (rudimentary or robust) first-person-perspective is a basic ontological ingredient, which is not susceptible to accounts ignoring this particular perspective. As Baker highlights, once an entity acquires a first-person-perspective, a new entity comes into existence that was not populating the world before. If the first-person-perspective is rudimentary, the entity is a subject of experience; if it is robust, it is a person. In both cases, the first-person-perspective is a unique feature, which has to be taken seriously in its uniqueness, and therefore it is not surprising that a first-person-perspective is not specifiable in non-first-personal-terms.

By making such a claim, the simple view rejects Parfit's definition of a reductionist account to personal identity (and persons). If the subjective perspective is not part of the picture, then, according to proponents of the simple view, an essential ingredient of reality is missing. Madell,

¹⁷ Baker 2000, 61.

¹⁸ Baker 2000, 64.

Nida-Rümelin and Baker emphasise the ineliminability and centrality of the subjective perspective. A centerless description of reality is unable to capture this crucial feature which distinguishes us and other conscious beings in a fundamental ontological way from all other non-conscious entities. The particularity of this feature is not the particularity of an individual entity uniquely satisfying a specific description. Rather, this particularity is grounded in a further fact, which by nature is not objective but subjective – an individual's subjective perspective.

3. Subjects of experience and the undetected-subject-switching-hypothesis

If a subject of experience is simple in the sense of having essentially a subjective nature, then one may ask in what sense such a subject persists in time. One argument often put forward claims that nothing informative can be said in respect to this matter for the simple reason that no objective conditions of persistence apply. All that we can say is that a subject of experience exists as long as its subjective perspective is exemplified, which is minimally informative. If nothing more about the persistence conditions of a subject of experience can be said, then one may suspect that these subjects do not persist for very long but are continuously replaced by a successor.¹⁹ The idea is that it is possible to imagine that on the ontological level a continuous replacement of subjects takes place unnoticed whereas on the epistemic level our impression of the persistence of the same subject holds because a continuous representation of the same I is generated. Kant raises this point when he writes:

The identity of the consciousness of myself at different times is [...] only a formal condition of my thoughts and their coherence, and in no way proves the numerical identity of my subject.²⁰

He illustrates this possibility with the following example:

¹⁹ Lund 2005, part II, calls this possibility the “Undetected Subject-Switching Hypothesis” and argues at length against it. The following reflections echo partly some of his thoughts.

²⁰ CpR A364.

An elastic ball which impinges on another similar ball in a straight line communicates to the latter its whole motion, and therefore its whole state [...]. If, then, in analogy with such bodies, we postulate substances such that the one communicates to the other representations together with the consciousness of them, we can conceive a whole series of substances of which the first transmits its state together with its consciousness to the second, the second its own state with that of the preceding substance to the third, and this in turn the states of all the preceding substances together with its own consciousness and with their consciousness to another. The last substance would then be conscious of all the states of the previously changed substances, as being its own states, because they would have been transferred to it together with the consciousness of them. And yet it would not have been one and the same person in all these states.²¹

Contemporary psychological continuity theories operating with the concept of quasi-memory or with a broader notion of causal dependency²² follow Kant's lead, at least in terms of argumentative structure. Although on the basis of different thoughts, Galen Strawson too proposes a similar view, which he calls the "pearl view". It claims that each human organism houses a continuous series of SESMETS – "Subjects of Experience that are Single Mental Things". Strawson writes:

The apparent continuity of experience [...] and the consistency of perspective across selves, derives from the fact that SESMETS 'appropriate' – in James's words – the experiential content of the experiences of their predecessors in a way that is entirely unsurprising in so far as they arise successively, like gouts of water from a rapidly sporadic fountain, from brain conditions that have considerable similarity from moment to moment even as they change.²³

Put differently, what seems to be required in order to make sense of our experience (and of the experiences of other sentient beings) is a synchronically unified entity at each determinate point in time. There is no need, however, to postulate that such a synchronically unified entity persists in time as the same subject for very long in order to make sense of our apparent continuous existence in time. All that is required for establishing our experience of diachronic unity is that earlier experiences are transmitted to a present subject in such a way that they

²¹ CpR A364

²² Shoemaker 1984, 89ff.

²³ Strawson 1999, 118-119.

are represented to the subject from her own perspective. In such a way, many short-lived subjects succeeding each other are able to generate and uphold the phenomenal experience of one persisting subject. What you have is a string of short-lived selves at the ontological bottom (therefore “pearl view”) and one subject persisting through various changes on the epistemic-phenomenal level.

Is such a view probable? I will argue in the next paragraph that there are good reasons not to think so. The idea that a subject can appropriate another subject’s mental states and experiences underestimates something fundamental – the subjective perspective, which makes a particular mental state or experience my own and not of anyone else. Mental states and experiences are not neutral properties that can be instantiated by different subjects but the subject enjoying them is constitutive for their identity. Since there is a deep ontological divide between different subjects of experience, the claim has some force that a continuous replacement of one subject with another will likely have an impact on the phenomenological level, or so I will argue.

3.1. The plausibility of the concept of q-memory

It is widely assumed that the concept of memory presupposes diachronic identity. If this is truly the case, then reductionist accounts to diachronic identity based upon a memory-criterion as famously proposed by Locke fail. In order to rehabilitate corresponding reductionist accounts the concept of q-memory has been introduced. Proponents of q-memory claim that this concept goes hand in hand with a reductionist account to diachronic identity because if a subject q-remembers an experience, then it is an open question who had the experience that is remembered. In fact, with the concept of q-memory one intends to show that the remembering subject does not need to presume that the experience remembered was his or her own. Thus, q-memory would validate accounts operating with an undetected-subject switching-hypothesis. According to Parfit, the constitutive elements of q-memory are as follows:

“(1) I seem to remember having an experience, (2) someone did have this experience, and (3) my apparent memory is causally dependent in the right kind of way, on that past experience.”²⁴

²⁴ Parfit 1984, 220.

Thus, in the case of ordinary remembering one and the same subject made the remembered past experience and remembers it whereas in the case of q-remembering the subject having made the remembered past experience is not identical to the subject that seems to remember having it. Accordingly, one can say that ordinary memory is a sub-class of q-memory. If we consider now the case of Parfit's "Venetian Memories", then q-memory seems to hold: Some of Paul's memory traces are supposed to be copied into Jane's brain. When Jane awakes from the operation she has a number of apparent memories of experiences which she realizes at a later point are extremely similar to the experiences Paul had when visiting Venice. Jane is aware of the memory-copying procedure she has undergone and therefore has good reasons to presume that her apparent memories about Venice are causally connected to the experiences Paul had when visiting Venice. If Jane is q-remembering, then the remembered experiences are presented to her in the first-person-perspective. She is having memories of herself walking through streets of Venice, drinking coffee at San Marco or listening to the bells of San Giorgio. Then, however, she does not seem to q-remember the experiences of another subject, Paul, because she and not Paul is the subject of the experiences remembered.

Parfit anticipates this objection and argues that Jane's apparent memory need not be presented in the first-personal mode because it may simply be presented from a spectator's point of view similarly to what happens in certain dreams in which the dreamer seems to see her body from a point of view outside of her own body.

The appeal to such a case is not convincing, however. First, the perspective from which the dreamer sees her body from the outside is the dreamer's subjective point of view not a view from nowhere. The dreamer takes the body seen from the outside to be her body but this fact – as remarkable as it may be – does not raise any doubt about whose viewpoint it is from which this fact is seen.

Second, if one claims that Jane's apparent memories are first-personal, then Jane can hardly be q-remembering Paul's experiences because Jane's remembering is not about Paul experiencing certain things but about herself doing so. However, Jane cannot q-remember an experience unless this experience actually happened, and this experience did not happen because it was Paul experiencing these things when visiting Venice and not Jane. Jane is remembering in a delusory manner for she never visited Venice and therefore the

remembered walking, drinking and hearing by her never occurred. The most we can say is that Jane's apparent memories share many similarities to Paul's experiences inasmuch as they are about certain events having taken place in Venice. When Jane learns about the causes of her memory, then she learns something about what has happened – Paul's experiences when visiting Venice – but not by remembering any experience personally made. In addition, Paul has a direct phenomenal link to his memories because it was him making these experiences; Jane, on the contrary does not because the transfer of memories to her are second-hand, so to say. Paul's remembering walking in Venice is about *his* walking in Venice, not *a* walking in Venice. Paul's remembering is essentially linked to Paul's subjective perspective because it contains *how* he experienced his walking there. Jane's remembering to walk in Venice does not include an essential link to her subjective perspective when walking in Venice because she never did so.

One could imagine that *what* was experienced by Paul – the memory-content – is presented to Jane in her q-memory in a first-personal mode. Then, however, either she mistakenly takes these q-memories to be veridical or if she does not, then she is aware of the fact that the only person having been in Venice was Paul and her memories are about Paul's experiences there. In the former case her memories would deceive her; in the latter case one may wonder whether it is still possible to speak about Paul's experiences at all which are q-remembered by Jane because the original first-personal mode characteristic of Paul when making these experiences is replaced by the subsequent first-personal mode characteristic of Jane.

Thus, the concept of q-memory presupposes that memory is a mental state with a determinate content that is neutral with respect to its bearer. The fact that a memory is possessed by someone does not affect the nature of the state at all. If, however, memories are not detachable from their bearers in such a way because they are essentially first-personal, then one may think that the content of one's memory has also the subject having it as a constituent feature.

The upshot of this discussion is that the case of the Venetian Memories does not provide any support for the general acceptance of q-memory because condition (2), that someone did have this precise experience, is not satisfied.²⁵ As a consequence, q-memory does not appear as a feasible

²⁵ On this discussion see Oderberg 1993, 183.

concept in support of the thesis that a numerically distinct subject is able to fully “appropriate” the experiences of another subject. In appropriating an experience of another subject in memory the first-personal character of this experience is missing. Consequently, something crucial and distinctive about a subject’s experiential memory would be lost in a process of continuous replacement of short-lived subjects of experience inheriting the experiences of their predecessors. Q-memory represents an inappropriate manner of memory at best. If we would all just q-remember, our way of remembering would be defective in a crucial manner.

3.2. The uniqueness of the subject’s point of view

As the discussion about q-memory shows there is a divide between memory and q-memory which grounds in the subject’s immediate relation to these memories. Paul has a direct subjective “link” to these memories because it was *him* making the experiences remembered. Jane is such that a direct “link” is missing being “only” the subject of a memory transfer. Thus, at issue here is the importance of the presence of the experiencing subject itself in her experiences.

A helpful tool for expounding this issue further is the concept of “for-me-ness” of our experiencing as discussed in recent phenomenology and philosophy of mind.²⁶ The driving idea behind this concept is the view that the subjective character of experiences is not merely a taking place of episodes in a subject characterized by a phenomenological aspect of what-is-likeness but this aspect involves essentially the feature of for-me-ness as well. There is an inherent relationship to the subject of experience in the sense that any experience by the mere fact of existing has a character of what-is-likeness *for* the subject. Thus, what-is-likeness is properly speaking what-is-like-for-me-ness.²⁷

Accordingly – as indicated in the discussion about q-memory – in a first interpretation the claim is that experiences are never free-floating qualitative episodes but are always instantiated by the subject having these experiences. Just as breathing presupposes the existence of an organism with a specific respiratory system, experiencing presupposes a subject of experience. There is, so to say, a direct and immediate “formal” link between an experience and the subject enjoying it.

²⁶ See, for instance, Zahavi 2011.

²⁷ Zahavi 2015, 145.

In a second, stronger, interpretation the claim is that for-me-ness does not merely refer to the formal relation between an experience and its possessor but that it highlights a phenomenal dimension of our experiencing too. For-me-ness indicates that here is a non-eliminable perspective-ness and given-ness in each experience made. An experience is, thus, not a combination of an experiential content plus the subject's perspective-ness or awareness of it. Rather, in the very experiencing itself the subject is present. Thus, one subject's experiencing a certain content is different from another subject's experiencing the same content because there is no neutral experiential content available to different subjects but the content as such is shaped in its experiential dimension by the subject having it.²⁸

For this reason, the well-known objection from Hume that no self can be found when looking for it introspectively has no point of attack against this view.²⁹ On the one hand, one could point out that Hume's objection rests on a misconstrued notion of substance because no substance can be observed apart from qualities inhering to it. A quality exists as the quality of an object and thus, what we can observe are always qualified substances and never bare particulars plus, in addition, some qualities.³⁰ On the other hand, one may claim that the very notion of for-me-ness implies that there is no observable "quale of the self" or "self-object" that can be accessed from the outside. For-me-ness does not come along with any specific experiential content in contrast to, say, enjoying the forest and earth notes of a complex pinot noir or feeling the pleasant warmth of the sun in spring. Rather, the point is that each experience is given to the subject in a specific and unique first-personal way and this feature permeates all of our experiential life. Thus, for-me-ness is not a content-related aspect of our experiential life which can be grasped by introspection. Rather, it is a constitutive aspect across all experiences, which, however is not purely "formal" but also "material" because it shapes how experiential content is given to a subject. Thus, without recognizing fore-me-ness, one fails to recognize the essentially subjective character of each experience, that is, that there is a subject

²⁸ See Zagzebski 2001, 417.

²⁹ Hume 1740/2000, 1.4.6.3: For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, [...]. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception."

³⁰ Lowe 2000, 513-14.

present in each experience made. Therefore it comes as no surprise that we will never observe introspectively a subject as such next to its specific experiences.

This discussion highlights that there is a deep divide between subjects. Each subject is related in a specific way to its experiences and this sets it apart from any other subject. Even if a subject were to fission into two identical twins, it would still be the case that these two subjects were deeply divided because of their individual fore-me-ness to the experiences made. There is a clear matter of fact which constitutes this difference.³¹

In the light of these reflections the far-reaching implications of the undetected-subject switching-hypothesis become apparent. A subject being substituted by another one is an event of highest importance for the subjects involved because it determines existence and non-existence: The subject substituted simply ceases to exist; there is no longer a life to be lived and experience to be made. The substituting subject, instead, comes into existence; it begins to live a life and to make experiences. From a subjective point of view, thus, the undetected-subject-switching-hypothesis involves the greatest possible metaphysical change whatsoever because it means a subject's life or death.

Strawson, for instance, claims that phenomenologically our experience matches with this ontological view. He considers a "series of radically disjunct irruptions into consciousness from a basic substrate of non-consciousness" an apt description of our conscious life.³² Strawson's view of short-lived selves is grounded in the claim that a subject cannot survive a break in experience and thus, each time when something new is experienced a new subject or self comes along with it as well. However, Strawson's phenomenological claim of radically disjunct irruptions seems to point primarily to higher cognitive processes such as the changing focus within our trains of thought. At the level of basic experiential, instead, one may argue that experiential break-downs and radical disjunct irruptions within the experiential stream are not the case. There seems to be no state in which our experiencing recedes completely and a mere continuation of physiological processes is all what is left. As Fuchs notes, "[e]ven during deep sleep or anesthesia,

³¹ Remember that Nida Rümelin argues that we do not seem to have any conceptual difficulties to grasp this difference (2012, 167-169).

³² Strawson 1997, 422.

there remains a basal experiencing and in principle awakable self, connected with and embedded in the process of life without absolute discontinuities.³³ According to this claim there appears to be a seamless continuity at the basic levels of experiencing. When awakening from sleep, for instance, we are not drawing an inferential conclusion that it was us being asleep for some time but we experience ourselves to rise gradually from a state of sleep to a state of wakefulness. There seems to be an experiential continuity between these states as experienced by us rather than disruptions calling for an active cognitive integration in one and the same individual experiential field.³⁴

As a consequence one may claim that the overall phenomenological datum does not support Strawson's view in particular or the undetected-subject-switching-hypothesis in general. Therefore Lund's claim that a change as radical as the replacement of the experiencing subject itself would have a direct phenomenological impact on our way of experiencing has some force.³⁵ The experience of the temporal seamlessness of our experiences fits better with the view of one enduring subject than with the view of a succession of different subjects being radically different from each other in respect to their fore-meness.

In order to corroborate the view of one diachronically extended subject further, I will present in the next section an additional argument which refers to the analysis of the inner structure of our experience.

4. Subjects of experience, diachronic binding and identity

We all experience change and persistence. The question is how we shall account for this datum. In the phenomenological tradition it was argued by Husserl and other proponents that a continuous succession of single separated moments of consciousness cannot account for our experience of persistence. To perceive an event or object as persisting in time presupposes a form of experientially unified consciousness. According to Husserl the basic unity of time-consciousness is not a momentary

³³ Fuchs 2017, 300.

³⁴ This view is compatible with the claim that we may not be constantly aware of this continuity because experiences become conscious only when reaching a certain degree of experiential intensity.

³⁵ Lund 2005, 194-195.

“now” but a temporal field comprising present, past and future.³⁶ Husserl himself uses the terms “primal impression” which refers to the present, resp. to what is presently experienced, “retention” which refers to the just elapsed experience and “pretension” which refers to what (expectedly) is about to be experienced in the next moment. The concrete structure of all our experiences is composed of a protentional aspect, a primal impression and a retentional aspect. This does not mean that these aspects are experienced as past or future from the time of the primal impression; rather what Husserl wants to emphasize is that the primal impression is embedded in a temporal horizon comprising past and future. We experience it as one and the same temporal extension. For clarifying purposes it is also important to be clear that retention and pretension ought to be distinguished from memory and anticipation.³⁷ Remembering one’s last exam at school or anticipating the family-gathering next week are intentional acts. We actively refer to some state of affairs in the past or future. Retention and pretension, instead, are structural aspects of our experiencing: We do not actively engage in any intentional act directed towards any past or future state of affairs but a present experience’s extended temporal dimension is given to us in the threefold “protention-primal impression-retention” mode because our way of experiencing automatically expands beyond the momentary present into the future and past. This is the way of how we experience to exist in time.³⁸

Thus, according to Husserl, the concrete content of our experience may change from moment to moment but the threefold structure of our experience of temporality or inner time-consciousness is the constant structural feature underlying all these experiences. Our experience is characterized by an intrinsic temporality that involves anticipatory and retentional features.

The interesting aspect for our purposes is that Husserl’s account provides us not only with a proposal of how we perceive objects as persisting in time but also how experiences themselves relate intrinsically to each other so that consciousness itself forms a unity in

³⁶ See Husserl 1966, 23, who underlines that he wants to argue against the view that being conscious of something consists in a present punctiform impression, memory of the past and future expectation of the future.

³⁷ Husserl 1966, 45–46.

³⁸ Similar considerations apply also to the experience of agency as, for instance, Gallagher 2011 emphasizes.

time. The idea is that, say, hearing tones of a melody comes along with a retention of my just-elapsed past experience of the melody at t1 and a protention of what I am about to experience in the next moment at t2; and the next moment at t2 comes along with a retention of my primordial impression of the previous moment at t1 and a protention of what I am about to experience in the next moment at t3, etc. The single moments are bound to each other by this “protention-primal impression-retention” mode, thus providing the subject having this experiences with diachronic unity. As constituting element of our experiencing this threefold structure amounts to a temporally extended subject which is not the product of any additional compositional work but inherently present in our experiences. According to this analysis, then, a subject of experience has an intrinsic diachronic dimension thanks to an inner feature of how experiences are made which I dub “diachronic binding”.

A critic may object at this point that diachronic binding, if accepted, shows at most two things: First, that subjects of experience are not momentous entities but enjoy some extension in time, and second, that it appears to be absurd that experiences intrinsically bound to each other start off as yours but end up as those of another subject as, for instance, Parfit’s spectrum cases suggest in regard to psychological or physical continuity. All what we get then, are entities like Strawson’s SESMETS, which come to an end once experiential continuity breaks down and diachronic binding cannot unfold in time anymore.

There are two ways at least for addressing this worry, that is, for arguing for the persistence of one and the same subject instead of assuming a succession of many short-lived ones. On the one hand, one may deny that a total breakdown of experiential continuity within a sentient being’s life is a realistic option at all. If one accepts the claim that even during deep sleep, coma or anesthesia our experiential life comes not to a complete halt, then one may assume that the diachronic binding continues to be in force although on an unconscious level till the subject’s life comes to an end. For a sentient being to exist, then, implies to exist as a subject of experience. For it there is an intrinsic connection between being alive and experiencing, between *Leben* and *Erleben*, as Fuchs puts it.³⁹ Therefore a subject of experience exists as long as it makes experiences that are diachronically bound to each other.

³⁹ See Fuchs 2012.

On the other hand, one may accept that experiential continuity may break down in periods of deep sleep, coma or anesthesia and with the breakdown of experiential continuity also the subject recedes into non-existence because a subject of experience cannot exist as a pure potentially experiencing entity in complete separation from experience. However, why assume that diachronic identity of the subject of experience is dependent upon uninterrupted experiential continuity? If experiential continuity breaks down and reassumes at a later point in time, then the question about the subject's diachronic identity depends upon the sameness of first-person-perspective⁴⁰ or for-me-ness⁴¹, and nothing else. In other words, it is not continuous objective time between two experiences that is decisive but whether the two experiences fall into the same first-person-perspective or not, that is, whether they are experiences displaying the same for-me-ness and as such being experiences for one and the same subject.

One may object that such a view implies intermittent existence, and it is strange to do so. Such identity-conditions may be the case when it comes to conventionally constituted entities like clubs or associations but in the case of living beings ceasing to exist means to go out of existence for once and all. Such a view on the matter rests on an external perspective. It is motivated by the idea that there must be causal relations of some kind available between one series of interrelated experiences and the other one similar to a chain whose single members ought to be concatenated for forming one single long chain and not two similar but separated and thus distinct shorter chains. As the discussion about the ontological status of subjects of experience has shown, however, this is the wrong perspective to address the issue at hand. The particularity of subjects of experience is that they are by nature not objective but subjective; the persistence condition of a subject of experience is its individual's subjective perspective not some objective psychological or physical features.

One may worry that such a subjective or first-personal account to diachronic identity is opening the door to weird metaphysical possibilities such as one and the same subject having first one and then

⁴⁰ Baker 2007, 345. She writes: "In my opinion, there is no informative non-circular answer to the question: 'In virtue of what do person P1 at t_1 and person P2 at t_2 have the same first-person-perspective over time?' It is just a primitive, unanalyzable fact that some future person is I; but there is a fact of the matter nonetheless."

⁴¹ Zahavi 2014, 72.

a completely different body. If the only identity condition is sameness of the subjective perspective, then body switching or having no body at all should not affect questions of existence and persistence.⁴² The thrust of this worry depends on how the relationship between the subject and her body are construed. If construed in purely contingent terms, then the worry has some force. The problems associated with such an understanding of the mind-body-relation cannot be addressed here due to lack of space.

It suffices to say, however, that a more natural understanding seems to be that the specific character of each subjective perspective is essentially bound to the individual's body for the body is not an external appendage to the subject's existence but an integral part of it. Our bodies are, in other words, not given to us as something distinct from us; rather, we experience ourselves as one with them. Speaking about subjects of experience, then, implicitly refers to the subject's body as well because subjects never exist in separation from their bodies but always as embodied beings.⁴³ If so, body-switching or body-losing scenarios are excluded from the outset.⁴⁴

5. Conclusion

It has been argued that subjects of experience are a further fact that defies any impersonal or objective description of reality because of their being essentially subjective. As such they are not some kind of unchanging immaterial soul existing separately from changing states of consciousness. Rather, they are the subjects of their changing conscious states whereby the subject is not reducible to these states. The idea is that the subject possesses experiential life and it is to be identified with an unique and ubiquitous first-person-perspective of its experiences.

⁴² Baker 2007, 346, for instance, sees this as a real possibility within her understanding of the constitution view.

⁴³ It would require more space to unfold this phenomenologically inspired view of the subject-body-relationship in detail but as a small notice for the present purposes it may suffice. The discussion of this issue is diverse and intricate because various concepts of embodiment have been proposed. Seminal contributions to the recent debate are, for instance, Bermúdez, Marcel and Eilan 1995, Gallagher 2005 and Gallagher and Zahavi 2008.

⁴⁴ As a consequence one may also doubt whether conceivability-claims as put forward by Nida-Rümelin are really that easily conceivable as suggested.

Thus, experiences are never neutral but always bound to a specific subject. What are the persistence conditions of these subjects? One influential line of thought proposes that subjects may be short-lived entities succeeding each other. Each subject exists for so long as it has one and the same experience. With the changing of the experience, the subject is replaced as well. The basic intuition behind this proposal is the idea that our experiential life is not continuous but discontinuous, that short periods of consciousness are followed by short periods of non-consciousness. Apart from the fact that this view is phenomenologically controversial at least, it is ontologically extravagant. A succession of subjects of experience – no matter how similar they are to each other – are still ontologically as different from each other as I am from a woman in Venice in the 14th century. We are two distinct subjects, full stop. Experiential similarity cannot fill the gap between this deep ontological divide. One may wonder, then, whether a succession of experiential subjects would remain unnoticed in our experiential awareness indeed. A more natural alternative is to claim that diachronic identity is provided by the first-person-perspective characterizing each experience. If the subject at t_1 has the same first-person-perspective as the subject at a later point in time t_2 , then diachronic identity is preserved – even if there are gaps between t_1 and t_2 . I do not consider the possibility of intermittent persistence as particularly demanding from a metaphysical point of view given the nature of subjects of experience. If they are essentially subjective, then sameness of the subjective perspective as guarantor of diachronic identity is a direct consequence thereof. The diachronic identity provided by the same first-person-perspective is all there is to be had for a subject of experience. One may remember that reference to the same first-person-perspective is by no means uninformative. This perspective is internally structured in such a way that subjects of experience are intrinsically temporally extended beings. It may also resonate the embodied existence of the subject having it such that transferring one's first-person-perspective to another entity like Locke's parrot is excluded by reasons which follow intrinsically from having this perspective. To look for a more robust form of identity by asking for additional objective identity-conditions is to apply a standard that deeply misconstrues the nature of the entity in question. The particularity of subjects of experience is that they are essentially subjective. To miss this, is to miss the subject itself.

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