

PHIL 260: Ethics  
Winter 2006; David O. Brink  
Persons & Values  
Handout #4: Personal Identity and Special Concern

Various writers on personal identity assume that some sort of special concern is legitimately associated with personal identity – that we are justified in having a kind or degree of concern for ourselves, for instance, our own futures, that is greater or different from the concern we have for others. As Locke writes

In this *personal Identity* is founded all the Right and Justice of Reward and Punishment; Happiness and Misery; being that, for which everyone is concerned for *himself*, not mattering what becomes of any Substance, not joined to, or affected with that consciousness [Essay II.xxvii.18; cf. §26]

Butler, we have seen, mistakenly criticizes the Lockean conception of personal identity as committed to identity in only a “loose and popular” sense, rather than a “strict and philosophical” sense (“Dissertation,” 263-65). From which Butler concludes

And from hence it must follow, that it is a fallacy upon ourselves, to charge our present selves with anything we did, or to imagine our present selves interested in anything which befell us yesterday, or that our present self will be interested in what will befall us to-morrow; since our present self is not, in reality, the same with the self of yesterday, but another like self or person coming in its room, and mistaken for it; to which another self will succeed to-morrow. ...[F]or if the self or person of to-day, and that of to-morrow, are not the same, but only like persons, the person of to-day is really no more interested in what will befall the person of to-morrow, then in what will befall any other person [“Dissertation,” 267].

As Perry says, when I learn that someone will be suffer tomorrow, I feel sadness or regret. When my informant adds the information that this someone will be me, my reaction is both different and more intense (“The Importance of Being Identical,” 67). We seem to care about ourselves, and especially our futures, in a way and to an extent that we do not care about strangers, and most of us think that this sort of special concern for ourselves is legitimate. Indeed, there is some plausibility to the view that some such special concern for our own projects, beliefs, and deliberations may be partly constitutive of personal identity.<sup>1</sup>

### **EXPLANATORY PRIORITY?**

Locke and Perry seem to assume that we should accept a theory of personal identity which can explain the legitimacy of special concern. On this view, our conception of personal identity should be fitted or adapted to special concern. Speaking loosely, we might say that personal identity tracks special concern. But this might seem to get things backward. Special emotions

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<sup>1</sup>To avoid circularity, the psychological reductionist would have to understand personal identity to consist, in part, not in special concern, but quasi-special concern, which presupposes only continuity and not identity.

come into play once I learn that the subject of future joy or sorrow is me. Here, special concern seems to track personal identity; it does not seem to constrain it. This reflects two larger metaphilosophical possibilities.

1. Metaphysics can and should be adapted to ethics (especially normative assumptions about the importance of persons).
2. Ethics can and should be adapted to metaphysics.

(1) suggests that **Priority of Ethics**, whereas (2) suggests the **Priority of Metaphysics**. Of course, we may have to choose between these two (incompatible) forms of priority. But there is a third possibility – **No Priority** – which would amount to the view that intellectual influence or pressure could be **bi-directional**.

Consider a related analogy. We may think that persons deserve to be treated with respect. So, in one sense, respect tracks personhood. But we can also legitimately demand of any account of what it is to be a person that it will help explain why creatures like that deserve respect. I take this situation to be one of potential mutual influence or No Priority. A similar situation may obtain between personal identity and special concern. If so, we can agree that special concern might track special concern, while also agreeing that we might seek an account of personal identity adequate to our attitudes of special concern.

#### **PERRY'S IMPERSONAL ACCOUNT OF SPECIAL CONCERN**

Perry argues that a psychological reductionist can explain and justify special concern, in particular, our special investment in **personal projects**.

- **Personal** or **private** projects are those in which the agent figures essentially, for instance, I want to be the one to find a cure for AIDS, I want to write a book in ethical theory about practical reason, moral demands, and the normativity of ethics, and I want to raise my children to be virtuous and lead fulfilling lives.
- **Impersonal** projects are those in which the agent does not figure essentially, for instance, I want a cure for AIDS to be found, I want the Red Sox to win the World Series, I want a certain kind of book in ethical theory to be written, and I want my children to grow up to lead virtuous and fulfilling lives (notice that the first two of these four are doubly impersonal, whereas the last two are only singly impersonal).

Part of special concern seems to involve our special investment in personal projects.

Perry offers a somewhat deflationary impersonal account of special concern, according to which personal projects are **psychologically and normatively derivative**. On this view, private projects are adopted (initially), and their pursuit is justified, as the most reliable way of attaining one's impersonal projects. Which impersonal projects I now value depends upon my current beliefs, values, and desires. These states make me the most likely one to execute the projects now, and psychological reductionism implies that future stages of myself are likely to remain best suited to the execution of these projects.

Compare Sidgwick's admirably clear-headed utilitarian justification of the sort of special concern for oneself and one's intimates embodied in special obligations. In the Methods of Ethics Sidgwick claims that common-sense morality is "inchoately and imperfectly Utilitarian" (ME 427). He maintains that "the commonly received view of special claims and duties arising out of special

relations, though *prima facie* opposed to the impartial universality of the Utilitarian principle, is really maintained by a well-considered application of that principle" (439). He argues that the recognition of special obligations and a differentially greater concern for those to whom one stands in special relationships is in general optimal, because we derive more pleasure from interactions with associates, we often have better knowledge about how to benefit associates, and we are often better situated causally to confer benefits on associates (431-39).

### **PROBLEMS FOR THE IMPERSONAL JUSTIFICATION OF SPECIAL CONCERN**

However, even if the demands of special concern and impartial concern often coincide, the coincidence is imperfect. I may derive more pleasure from interaction with my associates than with strangers, but those who are strangers to me have their own associates who derive special pleasure from them. If so, it's not clear how an impartial concern with happiness explains why I would have any reason to privilege the claims of my associates over those who are strangers to me but associates of others. Moreover, often -- where the beneficiaries are near at hand and the benefits in question are fairly obvious -- I am just as well positioned epistemically and causally to benefit strangers as to benefit my associates. When this is so, the classical utilitarian has no reason to regard an agent's investments in his friends as a more efficient use of his resources. Suppose A and B are friends with each other but not as of yet with C. If A's reasons for caring about his friend B are exhausted by an impersonal concern with recognizing and promoting human welfare, then his special concern for B must be limited. If C's welfare could be advanced more efficiently than B's, then it is unclear why A should not abandon B for C or at least in this case prefer the stranger to his friend.

Similar reservations apply to Perry's impersonal account of special concern. In some cases personal projects are entirely derivative from impersonal projects. I want to find a cure for AIDS because I want AIDS to be cured. If the impersonal project were achieved by others, my failure to achieve this personal project would not be cause for regret and I would drop that project with comparative equanimity.<sup>2</sup> But this is not true of other personal projects. Though my desire to raise my kids well is premised in significant part on the quasi-impersonal desire that my kids be raised well (it's not fully impersonal, because the desire concerns my kids, not kids, as such). The significance of my personal project is not exhausted by the significance of the impersonal project, as is evidenced by the fact that I would have regrets even if my children were raised well if I did not parent them well myself. Suppose I learn that I will die soon from an untreatable disease. I may take some consolation in knowing that they will be raised well by the Perfect Foster Family. Perhaps the Perfect Foster Family will even raise them better than I would have. But my personal parenting project will remain unfulfilled and the legitimate cause of genuine regret. Or I may have a personal project of proving a novel theorem. I want not simply that the theorem be proved but that I do the proving. Suppose the theorem is proved by some stranger to me, perhaps in exactly the same way I would have (or perhaps by an even more elegant proof). I can be glad of the proof of the theorem and have genuine admiration for the other prover. But surely my personal ambition remains unfulfilled, and this is the cause for genuine regret. The moral of these examples seems to be this:

- **Many personal projects have normative significance for us that is out of proportion to their impersonal value.**

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<sup>2</sup>I'm assuming that I'm not to blame for not having contributed to the achievement of the impersonal project.

## SPECIAL CONCERN AND AGENT-RELATIVITY

Special concern apparently requires an **agent-relative** account; a reason is agent-relative if its general form involves essential reference to the person who has it. Otherwise, it is **agent-neutral**. Impersonal theories, such as utilitarianism, are agent-neutral. By contrast, consider two forms of agent-relativity.

- **Egoism**: One has reason to act just insofar as doing so promotes the agent's own interests or welfare.

Whereas egoism easily explains intrapersonal special concern, it appears to make all interpersonal special concern instrumental. Another form of agent-relativity is the view that C.D. Broad called **self-referential altruism** and associated with common sense morality. Like utilitarianism, it recognizes a reason to be concerned about anyone whom it is in the agent's power to affect for better or worse.

On the other hand, the altruism which common sense approves is always limited in scope. It holds that each of us has specially urgent obligations to benefit certain individuals and groups which stand in certain special relations to himself, e.g. his parents, his children, his fellow-countrymen, etc. And it holds that these special relationships are the ultimate and sufficient ground for these specially urgent claims on one's beneficence ["Self and Others," 280].

In this passage, Broad runs together issues about scope and weight. His considered view seems to be that morality has wide scope but variable weight. We can reformulate his doctrine this way.

- **Self-Referential Altruism**: An agent has non-derivative reason to benefit anyone whom it is within her power to help, but the weight or strength of the agent's obligations is a function of the relationship in which she stands to potential beneficiaries.

Some form of agent-relativity, such as egoism or self-referential altruism, seems to offer a better account of self-directed special concern than a purely impersonal or agent-neutral account. Self-referential altruism may look more promising when we turn our attention to interpersonal forms of special concern,

## INTERPERSONAL SPECIAL CONCERN

Locke, Butler, Perry and others focus on self-directed special concern. It's not clear if they think that special concern is confined to concern with one's own happiness. If so, they assume that **special concern presupposes personal identity**. But, as our discussion reflects, there can be interpersonal special concern, especially for family, loved ones, friends, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, for less intimate associates, such as colleagues and neighbors. Common sense morality, as Broad understands, recognizes interpersonal, as well as intrapersonal, special concern and so denies that special concern presupposes identity.

In this context, it is a virtue that psychological reductionism can explain how there can be interpersonal, as well as intrapersonal, special concern. Recall that fission is, according to the psychological reductionist, the limiting case of interpersonal psychological continuity. There is, by hypothesis, just as much psychological continuity in this interpersonal case, as in the non-

branching intrapersonal case. This is why it seems reasonable for Tom to have the same sort of special concern for Dick and for Harry that he would normally have for himself. But both connectedness and continuity are scalar concepts: they can hold to varying degrees. But then fission can be seen as just the most extreme form of a very common phenomenon – **interpersonal psychological continuity**. Persons will be psychologically connected whenever they interact psychologically and the intentional states and actions of one are counterfactually dependent on the other, and they will be continuous whenever they stand in a series of persons who are psychologically connected. But then many people will be connected and continuous with others roughly in proportion to the extent of their psychological interaction and influence. In particular, associates who share experiences, deliberate and plan together, and influence each other's beliefs, desires, values, plans, and activities will be psychologically connected.

### PLATONIC LOVE AND IMMORTALITY

One illustration of these ideas can be found in Plato's discussion of philosophical eros and its relation to immortality in the Symposium. Plato describes an ascent of desire through various stages (Symp 210a-212a). This ascent moves from (1) love of a particular beautiful body, to (2) love of bodily beauty, as such, to (3) a love of all beautiful bodies, to (4) a love of spiritual beauty, that is, what is fine or beautiful in souls, to (5) a love of fine laws and institutions, to (6) a love of all kinds of knowledge, to (7) a love of what is fine, as such. This last, best sort of love aims at what is good or fine (201a, 204d, 205d, 206b-e) and, in particular, at propagating what is good or fine (206c-208a, 212a). Plato believes that virtue is fine and that spiritual love aims at producing virtue. In middle dialogues, such as the Republic, he understands virtue as a psychic state in which one's appetites, emotions, and actions are regulated by practical deliberation about one's overall good. Virtue, so understood, is the controlling ingredient in a good or flourishing life. So when A loves B, Plato concludes, A will aim to make B virtuous (Symp 209a, 212a).

Such love benefits the beloved, because one benefits by becoming virtuous precisely insofar as one is better off being regulated by a correct conception of one's overall good. But Plato also believes that the lover benefits from loving another (Phaedrus 245b), as he must if he is to reconcile interpersonal love with his eudaimonist assumption that a person's practical reason should be regulated by a correct conception of her overall good. The key to seeing how Plato can reconcile interpersonal love with self-love is to appreciate the way in which he thinks that reproducing one's virtuous traits in another is the next best thing to immortality (Symposium 206c1-209e5; Phaedrus 276e-277a).<sup>3</sup> According to Plato, my own persistence over time, despite both compositional and qualitative change, is a matter of reproducing my traits into the future.

Now although we speak of an individual as being the same so long as he continues to exist in the same form, and therefore assume that a man is the same person in his dotage as in his infancy, yet, for all we call him the same, every bit of him is different, and every day he is becoming a new man, while the old man is ceasing to exist, as you can see from his hair, his flesh, his bones, his blood, and all the rest of his body. And not only his body, for the same thing happens to his soul. And neither his manners, nor his disposition, nor his thoughts, nor his desires, nor his sufferings, nor his fears are the same throughout his life, for some of them grow, while others disappear. ... In this way every mortal creature is perpetuated, not by always being the same in every way, as a divine being is, but by what goes away and gets

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Kraut, "Egoism, Love, and Political Office in Plato"; Irwin, Plato's Moral Theory, pp. 241-42, 267-73 and Plato's Ethics, ch. 18; and Price, Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle, chs. 2-3.

old leaving behind and in its place some other new thing that is of the same sort as it was [207d3-208b12].

Though Plato mentions both physical and psychological persistence, it is clear that his real concern is with psychological persistence. For he regards the soul essentially as a capacity for deliberation, decision, and action (Phaedrus 245c-e), and he regards eudaimonia as consisting in the proper psychic ordering of the agent's soul. So my persistence requires my psychological reproduction into the future, and if this is to be good for me, I must reproduce my valuable traits into the future; if virtue is the dominant component of my eudaimonia, this requires me to reproduce my virtuous traits into the future. But interpersonal love involves the reproduction of my virtuous traits in another, who can live beyond me; this is why interpersonal love is correctly viewed as the next best thing to immortality. It also explains why spiritual intercourse and love are better than bodily love and intercourse; spiritual love begets greater and more valuable progeny (Symposium 209a1-e4). This explains why Plato would regard Socrates or Solon as more fecund and closer to immortality than the old woman who lived in the shoe (who had so many children she didn't know what to do).

So Plato appears to appeal here to psychological reductionist ideas about personal identity to vindicate the idea that special concern can and should take an interpersonal form. Indeed, on Plato's view, it appears that interpersonal concern is assimilated to intrapersonal concern, as we might expect given his commitment to eudaimonism. For he seems to think that love of another is just a special case of self-love. I extend myself into the future by reproducing my traits into the future. But I can also reproduce myself somewhat less systematically in others by sharing thought and discussion with them, in particular, thought and discussion about how best to live. In the intrapersonal case, I not only extend my interests; my self-reproduction is systematic enough to extend my life. Where my self-reproduction is, for various reasons, less systematic, I do not survive; but the very same sort of self-reproduction extends my interests. On this view, the interests of those whom I love become part of my interests in just the sort of way that the interests of my future self are part of my overall interests.

#### **OTHER EXTENSIONS OF SELF-CONCERN**

- Aristotle on familial friendship, second self, and posthumous benefits and harms.
- Personal projects presuppose personal identity; quasi-personal projects do not. Quasi-personal projects also have significance out of proportion to their impersonal value. For instance, I can view the completion of my (quasi-personal) projects by family members, loved ones, or students as a surrogate for completion of my personal projects. Dying with heirs who complete my quasi-personal projects is better than dying with no heirs and leaving both personal and quasi-personal projects unfulfilled.