

*Death and the Disintegration of Personality*¹

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Introduction

Quite a few years ago, in another context and while thinking about other things, I said that I thought that there are some dead people. Not ghosts. Not restless specters. (I am no Haley Joel Osment.) Just corpses. I said that I thought that in typical cases people go on existing as corpses for a while after they die. I mentioned that a mummy might go on existing for quite a long time. That would be a dead person, right?

Some of my friends thought this was a totally crazy notion. They insisted that no mummy could be a *person*! No mouldering corpse could be a *person*! A corpse might be the left-over remains of a person; but it could not actually be a *person*.

In order to avoid pointless conflict, I retreated to what I assumed would be a less provocative position. Instead of saying that there are dead people, I maintained merely that there are some dead things that *formerly were people*. In effect I said that something could be a person for a while and then (around the time of its death) it could stop being a person but could go on existing as a corpse for a while. Or, if in Egypt, for a long time.

My friends then thought they had me cornered. My view was untenable. For I had admitted that when something that has been a person dies, it stops being a person; but surely I would have to agree that if a thing that has been a person stops being a person, it must go out of existence. No one can survive the loss of personality. Thus, I would have to admit that when a person dies, he or she goes out of existence.

So, in effect, my friends had presented an argument. The argument purports to establish the conclusion that people go out of existence when they die. Elsewhere I have dubbed this “the Termination Thesis” (Feldman, 1992, p. 89). The argument makes use

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of just two main premises:

1. When a person dies, he or she loses the property of being a person.
2. But when a person loses the property of being a person, he or she ceases to exist.
3. Therefore, when a person dies, he or she ceases to exist.

I will refer to this as “The Personality Argument for the Termination Thesis”. My central claim in this paper is that the Personality Argument is not sound.

Note that the argument is based on two central claims about personality. The first is the claim that death deprives us of our personalities. The second is that no one can survive the loss of personality – when we are deprived of our personalities, we go out of existence. Clearly, in order to evaluate the argument, we need to understand personality. What is the property that we ascribe to a thing when we say that it is a person?

I began to think about the property of being a person. I have now come to some conclusions. Perhaps first among these is that although the word ‘person’ (and ‘people’ and ‘persons’) are used unproblematically in ordinary conversation, very few who use the word can give any coherent account of what they mean by it.² I asked a lot of people to explain what they meant when they said that something is “a person”. Some got angry; some said it was a stupid question; a few made some vague remarks before giving up. We talk about persons; we don’t know what we mean.

Philosophers and others with axes to grind do have views about the nature of personality. I think these views fall into several main categories: there are *biological theories of personality*. According to one variant of this thought, when we say that something is a person, we are saying something about the biological species to which it

² I use ‘persons’ and ‘people’ interchangeably as the plural of ‘person’. I use ‘personality’ to refer to the property of being a person. ‘Personhood’ and ‘person-ness’ might do as well, but they seem a bit weird.

belongs. On this view, to say that something is a person is to say that it is a member of the species *Homo sapiens*.

Quite a large collection of theories fall into the category of *psychological theories of personality*. According to these views, there is some psychological trait or ability, P, such that to say that something is a person is to say that it has P. A typical psychological theory finds its roots in some things that Locke said about personality. On this approach, the property of personality is to be identified with the property a thing has when it conceives of itself as persisting as one and the same thing through time.

Another large collection of theories can be classified as *moral theories of personality*. One of the most well known moral theories of personality was defended by Michael Tooley in his 1972 paper “Abortion and Infanticide”. Tooley said that as he used the term ‘X is a person’ is synonymous with ‘X has a (serious) right to life’ (p. 40).

Here’s how I am going to proceed: I am going to discuss each of the main families of concepts of personality – biological, psychological, and moral.³ In each case I will first say something about some of the main variants of the view. Then, for each of these families, I will select what I take to be a paradigm instance of that family.

For each of the paradigm concepts of personality, I will go on to discuss several metaphysical and semantical and semi-logical questions as they pertain to that concept. My hope is that what I say about these paradigm concepts will carry over to other concepts from the same family. Then, having identified and clarified the paradigm

³ In addition to definitions falling into these three main categories, there are a number of outlier definitions. For example, there is the legal concept of a person according to which something (including a corporation, or a union, or a town) is a person in some jurisdiction iff the laws of that jurisdiction give the thing some of the rights and obligations of natural persons; for example, the right to sue or be sued; the obligation to pay taxes; the right to “speak” freely; the right to own property. In the interest of keeping things simple, I will not discuss these outlier concepts of personality.

Furthermore, some philosophers apparently want to construct concepts of personality that involve combinations of elements selected from these different main strands. Thus, someone might say that a person is a human being (biological) that has self-awareness (psychological). I leave it to the interested reader to determine the implications of such theories.

concept, I will turn to the main questions: if we understand personality in the specified way, what happens to the Argument from Personality for the Termination Thesis? Does the proposed concept of personality support the view that people must lose their personalities when they die? Does it support the view that people must go out of existence when they lose their personalities?

I start with a discussion of the biological conception of personality.

Biological Conceptions of Personality

Many philosophers have noted that in ordinary usage, “person” often just means “human being,” where “human being” refers to a member of the species *Homo sapiens*.⁴ But it is interesting to note that there is a certain amount of controversy about who is to count as a human being. Apparently, the dominant current view is that there have been two distinct subspecies of *Homo sapiens*. “Our” subspecies is *Homo sapiens sapiens*. This subspecies has instances all over the earth and instances have been documented as far back as 200,000 years ago. The other subspecies is *Homo sapiens idaltu*. Individuals of that subspecies lived around 160,000 years ago in Africa. That subspecies is now extinct. Some taxonomists include several other varieties of archaic humans in the species *Homo sapiens*. But a lot of this is controversial. It’s not clear precisely how the concept of “human being” is supposed to connect to these groupings.

While philosophers have proposed other biological conceptions of personality,⁵ let us agree to use the term ‘person(b)’ to express the concept of personality based on the

⁴ See for example Goodman, 1988a, p. 7; DeGrazia, 1997, pp. 307-308; and Snowdon, 1996, pp. 39-40.

⁵ For example, David Wiggins’ view about persons is often seen as a biological view. According to his view, which he calls the *Animal Attribute View*, a person is an animal that has whatever features a typical human has. Since a typical human has many features, his analysis of personality is quite long. He says that his view “sees *person* as a concept whose defining marks are to be given in terms of a natural kind determinable, say *animal*, plus what may be called a functional or (as I shall prefer to say) systemic component. Perhaps *x* is a person if and only if *x* is an animal falling under the extension of a kind whose typical members perceive, feel, remember, imagine, desire, make projects, move themselves at will, speak, carry out projects, acquire a character as they age, are happy or miserable, are susceptible to concern for members of their own or like species...[note carefully these and subsequent dots], conceive of themselves as perceiving, feeling, remembering, imagining, desiring, making projects, speaking..., have, and conceive of themselves as having, a past accessible in experience-memory and a future accessible in intention..., etc.” (1980, p. 171). Wiggins acknowledges that according to his view, some non-humans might be

idea that a person is a member of “our” subspecies.⁶ Thus, we may define the term as follows:

D1: x is a person(b) at t =df. x is a member of the subspecies *Homo sapiens sapiens* at t .

If we adopt this concept of personality we will have to accept a certain collection of metaphysical and conceptual implications.

a. The Intrinsicity of Personality(b). It has often been noted that species membership is not a purely intrinsic feature.⁷ It would be possible for there to be two individuals that are intrinsically alike but not of the same species. Imagine, for example, that there are two populations of microbes, M1 and M2. Imagine that the members of M1 are earthly microbes with a certain genetic structure and history. Imagine that the members of M2 are intrinsically just like the members of M1, but that M1 and M2 are utterly unrelated. There is no common ancestor for M1 and M2. They arose independently on different planets. In this case, though a member of M1 might be intrinsically indiscernible from a member of M2, those two members would not be conspecific. In order to be conspecific, they would have to have a common ancestor.

Thus, since personality(b) is entirely a matter of biological subspecies membership, it too would not be an intrinsic feature of the things that have it. It would be possible for there to be a non-personal(b) individual who is nevertheless an intrinsic duplicate of a person(b). Such a creature would be non-personal(b) because it is not a member of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. It would be impossible to tell whether something is a person(b) merely by inspecting its intrinsic properties. A complete unraveling of the

classified as persons. So, while his view is often seen as a biological view, it might be better classified as a hybrid view that has both biological and psychological elements. Wollheim proposes a view that is somewhat similar to Wiggins' (1984).

⁶ I assume that you, dear reader, are like me a member of *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

⁷ For a nice discussion of whether species membership is an intrinsic feature, see Okasha, 2002. He argues that “on all modern species concepts (except the phenetic), the property in virtue of which a particular organism belongs to one species rather than another is a relational rather than an intrinsic property of that organism” (p. 201).

individual's genetic code would not be sufficient – unless we assume that it's impossible for the same genetic code to arise independently elsewhere.

b. A Matter of Degree. There is an inclination to think that each organism belongs to precisely one species – either it is a Robin or it's a Blue Jay. But the facts are not quite so simple. There are of course hybrids. Some creatures are the offspring of individuals of two different species. And in some other cases, there seems to be a continuum of individuals starting with ones on either end that are clearly in different species, but with a multitude of intermediate individuals. The intermediate individuals are more or less closely related to the “pure” species exemplars. A good example of this can be found in the case of arctic sea gulls. They form a “ring” consisting of numerous individuals falling into several main species and a variety of intermediate groups that are not clearly in any of the main species. In certain areas, the intermediate gulls can breed with their purebred neighbors both to the east and to the west. This suggests that species membership is really a matter of degree. One gull may be fully and entirely a member of a certain species while other gulls may be “to a certain extent” members of that species while at the same time being “to a certain extent” members of another species.⁸

If we reflect on the evolution of a species we see that this phenomenon of partial membership is not restricted to some rare instances up at the North Pole. If we assume that every species gradually evolved from some preceding species, then we have to grant that in every case there was a transition starting with individuals that were clearly in one species and involving many intermediate individuals and ending with individuals that are clearly in another species. The intermediate individuals would be to some extent members of the earlier species but at the same time to some extent members of the later species. This would give us even more reason to think that species membership is a matter of degree.

If this is right, and it holds for the subspecies *Homo sapiens sapiens*, then we would have to say that for every individual who is a member of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, he

⁸ For an interesting recent discussion of ring species, see Irwin, Irwin, and Price, 2001.

or she is a member of that subspecies *to some degree*. Perhaps most of us nowadays are full-fledged members – that would make us “pure people(b)”. But that would not be true of all of our ancestors, and it might not be true of some of our very distant current cousins.

If we look at this phenomenon in a slightly different way, we may choose to say that the concept of personality is vague, or indeterminate, in such a way that there would be groups of individuals who fall into a grey area in which it is neither determinately true nor determinately false that they are people(b).

c. Conventuality of Personality(b). Taxonomists debate the merits of competing taxonomies. One may point out certain advantages of viewing things in one way; another may argue for a different system. This has happened, for example, in the case of Bluebirds. Some claim that there are many subspecies; others prefer to list a smaller number. In the end, it seems to be something of a political debate – one taxonomy is declared to be the “winner” largely because it has been adopted by more ornithologists. If a different taxonomy had been more popular, it would have been the winner. Perhaps when we say that a certain taxonomy is “correct” or “true”, all we mean is that it is the winner in this conventional competition.

If we accept the biological concept of personality, then we will have to allow that there is something conventional about personality, too. We’d have to grant that it is somehow “up to us” to decide whether to view things in such a way that the concept of personality(b) would apply to a certain thing. All competing taxonomies might agree about the current extension of ‘Homo sapiens sapiens’. But they might disagree about our distant ancestors. One taxonomy might declare an ancient ancestor to have been an early member of our subspecies; another taxonomy might declare that ancestor to have been a late member of an earlier subspecies. The decision about where to place that ancestor might be a matter of political debate. It might be “up to us” – or perhaps, up to the paleoanthropologists.

d. The Persistence of Personality(b). Some properties come and go. I formerly had the property of being a graduate student. I no longer have it. Other properties are persistent. They stick with the things that have them. It seems to me that personality(b) is a persistent property. If a thing ever is a person(b), then it will always be a person(b) so long as it exists. I have no argument for this. I realize that taxonomists could decide to adopt a new taxonomy according to which some things that formerly were counted as members of a species are no longer so counted. But it seems to me that in such cases the taxonomists have really just decided to adopt a new species concept. Everything that fell into the former species still falls into it. Everything that now falls into the new species has always done so.

e. Personality(b) does not Determine a Natural Kind. According to a traditional view, the domain of natural objects is divided into a bunch of sets⁹; each natural object falls into precisely one of these sets; within each set, the members share some important intrinsic property – the “essence” of the kind; nothing outside one of these sets has the essence associated with a given set; there is nothing conventional or artificial about the division of things into these sets. The borders between these sets may be seen as the “joints” where Nature has been carved not by us, but by the way things are in themselves.¹⁰ Ideally, there should be no individuals in grey areas between these sets.

Each of these sets would be a natural kind.

If God had created a fixed array of species; if there were an intrinsic natural essence associated with each species; if all and only members of a species had the essence associated with that species; if each organism were a permanent member of precisely one species; if there were nothing conventional about species membership, then the division of organisms into species would have been a division into natural kinds. Since actual biological species lack all of these features, they are not natural kinds. And

⁹ I am suppressing the proviso: “at a given level of abstraction”.

¹⁰ The idea that the division into natural kinds “carves nature at its joints” seems to have its roots in something Plato said. See *Phaedrus* 266.

as a result of that, *Homo sapiens sapiens* is not a natural kind. Therefore, personality(b) does not determine a natural kind.¹¹

f. The Biologicalness of Personality(b). If we take personality to be the property of being a member of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, then we will have to say that every person is a biological organism. After all, every member of our subspecies is an animal.¹² Personality in that case becomes entirely a matter of biology.

g. The Psychologicalness of Personality(b). It should be clear that it is possible for there to be people(b) without psychology. Surely there are comatose members of the subspecies *Homo sapiens sapiens*. So there are comatose persons(b). I assume that it would be possible for a person(b) to come into existence, to grow and develop, and eventually to die without ever having been conscious. Going further, it seems clear that such an individual could have permanently lacked even the *capacity* for consciousness. If such an individual had the right sort of DNA, and the right sort of ancestry, he or she would be a permanently and unalterably non-psychological member of our subspecies. Psychology is no more than a happy accident for the rest of us. Thank your lucky stars.

h. The Humanity of Personality(b). There is debate and confusion about the personality of such things as Gods, corporations, humanoid-looking creatures like the Na'vi in *Avatar*, chimps and dolphins. Some want to say that these things are people; others want to say that they are not. Others are perplexed. But if we accept personality(b) as our concept of personality, these questions are settled. Clearly, God is not a member of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Therefore, God is definitely not a person(b). Nor are corporations, chimps, or dolphins. Science-fiction creatures such as the Na'vi and Mr. Spock are also not members of our subspecies and so are not persons(b). If we accept personality(b) as our concept of personality, we will have to say that none of these is a person. Not even a little bit.

¹¹ For an excellent discussion of this point, see Bird and Tobin.

¹² Perhaps this helps to explain some of the motivation behind animalism.

i. The Vitality of Personality(b). In typical cases if an organism is a member of a certain species (or subspecies) then it continues to be a member of that species (or subspecies) when it dies. A familiar thought experiment should confirm this.¹³ Suppose a butterfly collector goes out in the morning and catches and kills a bunch of butterflies. Suppose he comes home at the end of the day. He spreads out the day's catch on a table. He consults authoritative guidebooks to identify the specimens. "Aha. This one is a Monarch; this one is a Viceroy; and this one is an Eastern Tiger Swallowtail." He then pins the butterflies to a board, each with its appropriate label. The butterflies on his display board still exist and still are members of their respective species – dead ones. Why shouldn't the same be true of other biological species and subspecies – even *Homo sapiens sapiens*?¹⁴

Suppose suspended animation is possible. An organism can cease to be alive for a while and then come back to life. Suppose an organism is a member of a certain species; suppose the organism goes into suspended animation and then revives. Surely no one would want to say that the organism stopped being a member of its species while it was in suspended animation. I conclude that if personality is understood in the biological way as personality(b), then personality does not entail life. Something can be a person(b) at a time even though it is not alive at that time.

j. Personality(b) and the Termination Thesis.

Earlier I mentioned my friends' argument in favor of the Termination Thesis. The argument looked like this:

1. When a person dies, he or she loses the property of being a person.
2. When a person loses the property of being a person, he or she ceases to exist.
3. Therefore, when a person dies, he or she ceases to exist.

¹³ I appealed to this example in Feldman, 1992, p. 97.

¹⁴ Suppose a researcher discovers a completely intact frozen body in a glacier. He brings it back to the laboratory for analysis. After studying the DNA, he announces that he has discovered an early member of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Surely it would be wrong for a critic to say that it can't be a member of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, simply because it is dead.

Now suppose we interpret the concept of being a person according to the paradigm biological view. Then the argument as a whole looks like this:

1. When a person(b) dies, he or she loses the property of being a person(b).
2. When a person(b) loses the property of being a person(b), he or she ceases to exist.
3. Therefore, when a person(b) dies, he or she ceases to exist.

I cannot see any reason to suppose that premise (1) is true. I think that in typical cases if an organism is a member of a certain species (or subspecies) then it continues to be a member of that species (or subspecies) when it dies.¹⁵

I conclude that if we accept the biological concept of personality, then we must reject the little argument that I attributed to my friends.¹⁶ That's because a person(b) can die without losing his or her personality(b). My own view is that if we accept the biological conception of personality, we should reject the Termination Thesis.

Psychological Conceptions of Personality

Many philosophers have endorsed *psychological theories of personality*. According to these views, there is some psychological trait or ability, P, such that to say that something is a person is to say that it has P. A typical psychological theory is the one according to which the property of personality is to be identified with the property a thing has when it conceives of itself as persisting as one and the same thing through time. Thus, if I think that there was a time in the past when I was a child who did so-and-so, and that there will be time a time in the future when I will be an old man who will do

¹⁵ Some animalists might disagree with me here. Eric Olson, for example, probably would want to say that when an animal dies, it loses its species membership. Perhaps he would say this because he thinks that when an animal dies, it goes out of existence. In the present context, that would be question-begging. He claims that organisms go out of existence when they die in Olson, 2004, pp. 269-270.

¹⁶ As I mentioned at the outset, there are other biological concepts of personality. I believe that what I have said here carries over to all of them, but I acknowledge that I have not argued for this larger point.

such-and-such, then I am a person. If I cannot conceive of myself in this way as a persisting object, I am not a person.

Locke seems to be endorsing a complex view that contains a variant of this idea as a component in the passage where he says:

We must consider what *Person* stands for; which, I think, is a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it: It being impossible for any one to perceive, without perceiving, that he does perceive. (1979, 2.27.9, p. 335)

Comment [OCC1]: I changed the punctuation in this quotation a bit so that it exactly matches the edition I cite.

But there are many other versions of the view.

The other classic source for the psychological conception of personality is Boethius, who says that a person is “an individual substance of a rational nature” (1918, p. 93). Many modern philosophers accept Boethius’ suggestion that rationality is a fundamental feature of personality, but they typically go on to say that other psychological features are as well.¹⁷ Peter Singer, for instance, defines “person” as “a rational and self-conscious being” (1993, p. 87). Daniel Dennett claims that in addition to (1) being rational, persons must also be (2) beings to which states of consciousness are attributed, (3) beings whose personality is stance dependant, (4) capable of reciprocation, (5) capable of verbal communication, and (6) conscious in a special way (self-conscious, for instance) (1976, pp. 177-178).^{18,19} Thus, both Singer and Dennett think that

¹⁷ It appears, however, that John Pollock does not. He claims that “*the concept of a person must simply be the concept of a thing having states that can be mapped onto our own in such a way that if we suppose the corresponding states to be the same, then the thing is for the most part rational*” (1989, p. 111).

¹⁸ Dennett accepts conditions (1)-(3) because he thinks that persons are what he calls “Intentional Systems” (that is, beings whose behavior can be explained and predicted by attributing to them beliefs and desires (and other intentional states, such as hopes and fears)). He accepts (4) because he thinks that persons are not only Intentional Systems, but also second-order Intentional Systems (that is, beings whose behavior can be explained and predicted by ascribing to them second-order intentional states). He accepts (6) because he thinks that persons necessarily have second-order volitions.

consciousness, or some variety thereof, is a fundamental feature of personality. This thought is also shared by many other philosophers. Lynne Baker, for instance, says that a person is “a being with a first-person perspective” (in other words, roughly, a being that can conceive of itself as itself) (2000, p. 6). And Harry Frankfurt famously says that for something to be a person, it must be able to have second-order volitions, by which he means that it must be able to want a desire for something to be its will (1971, p. 10).²⁰ Other philosophers have proposed psychological conceptions of personality that focus on some psychological trait not yet mentioned. John Harris, for instance, says that the concept of a person is the concept of a being that is capable of valuing its own existence (1985, p. 18; 1999, p. 307). Robert Joyce, on the other hand, says that “person” can be defined as a being that has the natural potential to self-reflectively know, love, desire, and relate to oneself and others (1988, p. 200). It is clear, then, that psychological conceptions of personality are many and extremely varied.

For purposes of discussion, let us focus on a simplified Lockean version of the psychological concept of personality. It may be defined as follows:

D2: x is a person(p) at t =df. x is able at t to conceive of itself as itself existing before t , and x is able at t to conceive of itself as itself existing after t .

A number of commentators have pointed out that this concept of personality is certainly not equivalent to the biological concept of personality(b).²¹ Clearly there are members of our subspecies who are unfortunately unable to conceive of themselves as existing at other times – little babies, the comatose, the profoundly mentally disabled, and others. And equally clearly, there is no reason to suppose that the specified psychological

¹⁹ Kathleen Wilkes accepts Dennett’s six conditions of personality but is tempted to add a seventh: the ability to use tools (1988, p. 23). She goes on to add that “few, I hope, would wish to challenge any of these conditions; as yet they are too broadly stated to merit dispute” (p. 24). It’s hard to see how some of these conditions could possibly be beyond dispute, even when broadly stated.

²⁰ In the course of his paper, Frankfurt also suggests that a number of other features are necessary for something to be a person, including rationality, first-order desires, and the capability of having and lacking freedom of the will. Frankfurt also says that in addition to the concept of personality he is addressing in his paper, there is a biological concept of personality according to which “person” connotes “no more than membership in a certain biological species” (p. 6).

²¹ See for example Snowdon, 1996, pp. 39-40; and Frankfurt, 1971, p. 6.

ability is restricted to persons(b). Perhaps members of Homo sapiens idaltu were like us in this respect. Maybe even some chimps and dolphins are like this. Fictional characters like the Na'vi and Mr. Spock are described as being like this. Surely if the God of the Old Testament exists, He is like this. All these things would be people(p) but not people(b).

But this psychological concept of personality is different in even deeper ways from the biological concept of personality.

a. Intrinsicity of Personality(p). I find it difficult to see how there could be two things that are intrinsically indiscernible and yet one of them is a person(p) and the other is not. If the first thing can conceive of itself as itself, and the second thing is just like it intrinsically, it seems to me that the second one can think of itself as itself, too. If this is right, then personality(p) is an intrinsic property of the things that have it. In this respect, personality(p) differs from personality(b).

b. A Matter of Degree. It might be very easy for you to conceive of yourself as yourself at different times. It might be harder for me to do it. You might do it several times a day. I might do it just once a month. But if you can do it, and I can do it, then each of us is a person(p). It does not seem to me that the ease or frequency with which you can do it makes you “more of a person(p)” than I am. So I am inclined to think that personality(p) is not a matter of degree. If my inclination is correct, then this is another respect in which personality(p) is different from personality(b).

c. The Conventionality of Personality(p). Earlier I pointed out that there is something conventional about personality(b). As with all such matters of biological taxonomy, it seems to be possible for an agreement among the taxonomists to determine precisely where one subspecies ends and another one begins. If they had come to a different agreement, the borderline would have been elsewhere. Elegance, simplicity, fruitfulness and other pragmatic factors may favor one taxonomy over another.

Convention seems to play a much smaller role in the case of personality(p). We may be inclined to say that no one and no group has the power to decide that certain individuals can conceive of themselves as themselves at different times. Either they can do it or they can't. The fact of the matter may be somewhat less stark. Perhaps there is some vagueness in the expression 'can conceive of himself as himself'. There could be borderline cases where it's not clear whether we want to say that the expression applies to a certain individual; in this case there would be indeterminacy about whether an individual is a person(p). Maybe on one precisification of the concept it will turn out that the individual is a person(p) whereas on another he is not. We have the power to adopt one precisification rather than another. To that extent, personality(p) might be slightly "up to us".

d. The Persistence of Personality(p). It is pretty clear that personality(p) is not a persistent property. Someone who suffers a sufficiently severe brain injury may lose the property of being a person(p). This seems to me to be a respect in which personality(p) is different from personality(b). For it seems to me that while a blow to the head may make you lose your personality(p), it cannot make you lose your personality(b).

e. Natural Kinds. Personality(p) does not carve nature at its joints. It gathers together a motley collection of gods, dolphins, chimps, people(b), and computers. The individuals in this collection are not alike in any metaphysically interesting way. They are gathered together into this unnatural kind in virtue of the fact that each of them has a certain contingent psychological capacity. I claimed earlier that personality(b) does not determine a natural kind. I stand by that claim, but I recognize that there is a historical tradition according to which biological species are supposed to count as natural kinds. On the other hand, no one would claim that personality(p) determines a natural kind.

f. The Biologicalness of Personality(p). Whereas the biological concept of personality makes personality a matter of biology, the psychological concept of personality does not. I think we can imagine something that is a person(p) even though it is not a biological organism at all. God, pretty obviously, would be such a thing. Some

think they can imagine a non-biological computer that has been set up in such a way as to be able to conceive of itself as itself at different times. The computer HAL 9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey* seems to have this ability. If so, it would be a person(p) though not a biological organism. (This gives us even more reason to believe that personality(p) does not determine a natural kind.)

g. The Psychologicalness of Personality(p). *Biological personality* clearly does not entail psychology. There are unconscious people(b). Nor does biological personality entail even the capacity for psychology. There are people(b) who *cannot* become conscious. The irreversibly comatose are examples. This is another respect in which psychological personality differs from biological personality. For, while there might be unconscious people(p), it is impossible for there to be a person(p) who utterly lacks the capacity to become aware of himself as himself at another time. This is an immediate implication of the definition of personality(p).

h. The Humanity of Personality(p). No matter how smart they may be, dolphins, chimps, Na'vi, gods and other such things are not members of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. So they are not persons(b). But if we assume that these things can conceive of themselves as themselves at different times, then they are persons(p). Some empirical evidence suggests that chimps do have the relevant sort of self awareness.²² If that's right, then they are persons(p). The same would be true of other self-conscious beings, real or fictional. Welcome to the club. Personality(p) does not entail humanity.

i. The Vitality of Personality(p). Where biological organisms are concerned, psychology requires life. Dead men are not conscious. This suggests that personality(p) entails life. But if a computer like HAL 9000 could be aware of itself as itself, and if such a computer is not alive, then there are some people(p) who are not alive. The connection between personality(p) and life is, at best, merely contingent.

²² David Chalmers and David Bourget have compiled a useful annotated bibliography of recent papers on the topic of animal consciousness at *Mind Papers: A Bibliography of the Philosophy of Mind and the Science of Consciousness*, section 8.4c, <http://consc.net/mindpapers/8.4c>.

j. Personality(p) and the Termination Thesis. Now let us see how the Argument from Personality fares under this second interpretation. The argument looks like this:

1. When a person(p) dies, he or she loses the property of being a person(p).
2. When a person(p) loses the property of being a person(p), he or she ceases to exist.
3. Therefore, when a person(p) dies, he or she ceases to exist.

I think the first premise of this argument is true. I think that when a thing that has been a psychological person dies, its brain “shuts down”. It stops functioning. It loses all of its psychological capacities and so it loses the capacity to conceive of itself as itself at other times. So I think that when people(p) die, they stop being people(p).

On the other hand, I see no reason to accept premise (2). For it seems clear to me that personality(p) is a property that a thing can have for a while and then lose; indeed, in a perfectly familiar sort of case, an individual might start off without personality(p), and then he might come to have personality(p), and then he might lose his personality(p) while continuing to exist. Imagine an individual who is for a while just an embryo whose brain is not sufficiently developed for any sort of consciousness, and then who is a walking-around sort of regular person(p), and then who is irreversibly comatose. He goes through a phase during which he is a person(p) but this is preceded and succeeded by phases during which he is not a person(p).

In light of this feature of personality(p), it seems that there is no good reason to suppose that things would have to go out of existence when they lose their personalities(p). So if we accept the psychological conception of persons(p), then we should reject the Argument from Personality for the Termination Thesis.

I think it’s interesting to note that on the biological interpretation, the first premise of the argument is false, whereas on the psychological interpretation, the second premise of the argument is false. Perhaps a failure to appreciate the differences between these

two concepts of personality has led some to think there is a valid version of the argument in which both premises are true.

Moral Conceptions of Personality

Another large collection of theories can be classified as *moral theories of personality*. One of the most well-known moral theories of personality was defended by Michael Tooley in his 1972 paper “Abortion and Infanticide”. In a passage I mentioned earlier, Tooley said:

How is the term “person” to be interpreted? I shall treat the concept of a person as a purely moral concept, free of all descriptive content. Specifically, in my usage the sentence “X is a person” will be synonymous with the sentence “X has a (serious) moral right to life.” (p. 40)

Several years later, after further reflection, Tooley modified this definition. He then defined a person by saying that a person is a being that has at least one of the non-potential properties whose possession is sufficient for having a right to life (1983, p. 35). Later in the same work, Tooley proposed a somewhat different account of the nature of personality. He then defined a person by

asking what relatively permanent, non-potential properties, possibly in conjunction with other, less permanent features of an entity, make it intrinsically wrong to destroy an entity, and do so independently of its intrinsic value. A person can then be defined as an entity that possesses at least one of these enduring properties. (1983, p. 57)

This last account seems to me to be deeply problematic. For it implies that something can be a moral person only if it is intrinsically wrong to destroy it. But many familiar normative views imply that when it’s wrong to destroy a thing, it’s wrong because the destruction of that thing has bad consequences – worse than the

consequences of leaving it alone. On any such view, there is nothing that is *intrinsically wrong to destroy*. And the immediate consequence of this is that there are no moral people.

Many other philosophers have endorsed moral conceptions of personality much like Tooley's early one. Joel Feinberg, for instance, thinks that "person" has a normative sense according to which a person just is the sort of being that can have rights and duties (1980, p. 186); H. Tristram Engelhardt says essentially the same thing (1988, p. 175).²³ While Tooley, Feinberg, and Engelhardt all give definitions of personality in order to make claims about the morality of abortion, moral conceptions have also been proposed by philosophers outside the abortion debate. In fact, moral conceptions of personality, like psychological conceptions, have a long and venerable history. Kant, for instance, suggests in the *Groundwork* that "rational beings are called *persons* because their nature already marks them out as an end in itself, that is, as something that may not be used merely as a means, and hence so far limits all choice (and is an object of respect)" (1997, p. 37 [4:428]). Later, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he says that "a *person* is a subject whose actions can be *imputed* to him," and he goes on to say that "*Moral* personality is therefore nothing other than the freedom of a rational being under moral laws" (1996, p. 16 [6:223]).²⁴ Outside the Kantian tradition, a myriad of other moral concepts have been thought to be fundamental to personality. Roland Puccetti claims that to say that something is a person just is to say that it is a moral agent (1968, pp. 12-13).²⁵ Richard Rorty says that persons are things that possess moral dignity (1979, p. 127). Steve Sapontzis claims that for something to be a person is for it to be a thing whose interests must be respected (1981, p. 609).²⁶ And Eugene Schlossberger says that persons are things with full moral standing (1992, p. 32).²⁷ The list goes on and on.

²³ Both Feinberg and Engelhardt acknowledge that there are conceptions of personality in addition to the moral one.

²⁴ Kant goes on to define psychological personality as "the ability to be conscious of one's identity in different conditions of one's existence" (p. 16 [6:223]).

²⁵ Carol Rovane has a similar understanding of persons. She gives what she calls an "ethical criterion of personhood" according to which "*persons are agents who can engage in agency-regarding relations*" (1998, p. 72).

²⁶ Sapontzis, however, claims that "person" not only has a moral sense, but it also has a "metaphysical" sense.

²⁷ Schlossberger too suggests that there are multiple conceptions of personality.

For purposes of our present inquiry, let us make use of the first of Tooley's concepts of moral personality:

D3: x is a person(m) at t =df. x has a serious moral right to life at t .

The determination of which things are people(b) is a somewhat straightforward matter of biological classification, and the determination of which things are people(p) is a fairly straightforward matter of psychology, but the determination of which things are people(m) is profoundly un-straightforward. Those who think that chickens, pigs and cows have a serious moral right to life will insist that such creatures are people(m). Those who think that such creatures do not have any moral right to life will say that they are not people(m). It is not clear how this dispute is to be adjudicated.

Some, perhaps following Bentham, are dubious about the notion of moral rights in general. They may think that nothing has any such right. They would then have to say that there are no people(m). This might sound silly, but when we recall precisely what the statement means, it should seem much less silly.

But for purposes of discussion, let us assume that ordinary healthy human beings, while in the prime of life, have a serious moral right to remain alive. Then they are persons(m). And let us agree that it's an open question whether other creatures (chimps, dolphins, dogs, fetuses, trees, etc.) have a serious right to life. If we accept these assumptions provisionally, we can go on to consider some features of the concept of personality(m).

a. The Intrinsicity of Personality(m). It seems to me that it is at least conceivable that something could gain or lose the right to life as a result of another person's actions. For example, suppose God looks down on us and observes our behavior. Suppose He sees that some of us have been good and others have been bad. Suppose He then gives the good ones a serious moral right to life, and withdraws that

right from those who have been bad. Or suppose He grants that right to the Chosen People, but withholds it from others. Or suppose He grants or withholds this right on a mere whim. In this case, there might be two things that are intrinsically indiscernible, but one of them is a person(m) and the other is not. These things seem possible. So it's not clear that personality(m) is an intrinsic property. It's at least conceivable that things sometimes have it in virtue of the fact that they stand in certain relations to others.

b. A Matter of Degree. The question whether personality(m) comes in various degrees may be understood to be the question whether some people(m) have a greater moral right to life than others. If we understand the question in this way, then it seems reasonable to answer it in the affirmative. We may think that all members of Homo sapiens sapiens come into existence with a fairly serious moral right to life. But we may also think that someone may behave so badly that his right to life is diminished. Going beyond this, we may even say that if someone has committed a sufficiently horrific and unjustifiable series of crimes, he may lose his right to life altogether – at least according to one time-honored view.

A number of commentators have endorsed the idea that different sorts of creatures have the right to life to different degrees. Thus, for example, Mary Anne Warren suggests that while adult human beings have a full right to life, lower animals and mere fetuses have some right to life, but not a full right to life (2002, pp. 78-79). If any such view is correct, then the right to life is a matter of degree. And in that case, personality(m) is a matter of degree.

c. The Conventionality of Personality(m). We may all agree that the *legal* right to life is a matter of convention. It's up to the legislature or the Supreme Court to determine who has this right. But we are not here considering the question whether we have a legal right to life. We are considering the question whether we have a *moral* right to life. I have no settled view on this. I am inclined to think, however, that if there is a moral right to life, then it would not be up to us to decide who has it.

d. The Persistence of Personality(m). I should acknowledge that I don't have a very firm grasp on the concept of moral rights. Perhaps when we say that a person has a moral right to something, we mean that he deserves to have access to that thing; he deserves to have no one stand in his way of possessing it. Others have a corresponding obligation to help him get it; or at least to keep out of his way as he tries to get it for himself. If this is what we mean when we say that a person has a right to something, then it appears that rights are transitory. Suppose someone has a serious right to life; suppose he then goes on a completely unjustified killing spree. Just for kicks, he brutally murders dozens of innocents. Some would say then that this fellow's right to life has been seriously diminished, if not erased altogether. If such a thing is possible, it shows that the right to life is not a permanent property. It's possible for something to be a person(m) at one time, and then become much less a person(m), or maybe not a person(m) at all, at another time.

Some apparently think that we have a serious right to life because we have the capacity to suffer, or because we have the power of autonomous moral action.²⁸ It's clear that a person(m) could lose his capacity to suffer, or could lose his power of autonomous moral action. In such a case, the person(m) would lose his serious right to life. Thus, in such cases as well, a person(m) could lose his personality(m). Since such cases are obviously possible, we should acknowledge that if there is a serious moral right to life, it is something that can be lost. If so, personality(m) is impermanent.

e. Natural Kinds. If we assume any of the plausible views about the extent of the serious right to life, we will conclude that the class of persons(m) does not constitute a natural kind. For on any such view, this class would be a scattered collection of individuals chosen from a variety of distinct categories. Aside from the fact that they all have a serious moral right to life, they seem to have not much in common.

f. The Biologicalness of Personality(m). It seems reasonable to suppose that a thing could not have a serious moral right to life if it were impossible for that thing ever

²⁸ A variety of ideas like this are discussed in Regan, 1975, pp. 205-206.

to live. Thus if we assume that HAL 9000 is not a living thing, and could not live, then we might want to conclude that it has no serious moral right to life. In that case HAL 9000 would not be a person(m) in spite of the fact that it is a person(p). (Maybe he has a serious right not to be turned off.)

g. Personality(m) and Psychologicalness. It may seem that personality(m) does not entail psychology. For if we assume that a comatose person still has a right to life, then we must conclude that something can be a person(m) even though it is not conscious. If we think that trees have the right to life, then the conclusion is even more obvious. For in that case something could be a person(m) even though it does not have, and never could have had, any psychological states at all.

On the other hand, if we assume that the moral right to life depends essentially on the presence of some psychological state such as the ability to value life, then nothing could be a person(m) unless it had that psychological ability. So the psychologicalness of personality(m) depends upon what we take to be the source, or foundation, of the right to life.

h. The Humanity of Personality(m). From the fact that something has a serious right to life, we may not infer that it is a human being. Dolphins, chimps, Na'vi, human-like creatures from other planets (if there are any such things), all would have a reasonable claim on personality(m). Yet none of them is a member of *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

i. The Vitality of Personality(m). Suppose a morally upstanding young man has a currently incurable disease. He decides to try cryopreservation. He enters into an agreement with the cryopreservationists: he will give them a lot of money; they will keep him safely frozen until a cure is found for his disease; then they will reanimate him and he will then get the treatment he needs. Everyone signs the contract and they shake hands. Accordingly, he is frozen. He goes into suspended animation. Later, a cure for his disease is found. The cryopreservationists say "The hell with him. Let him remain an

ice cube. Anyway, he has no right to life.” If we assume that the young man had a serious right to life before he was frozen, we will presumably want to say that he still has the right to life. If so, personality(m) does not entail life.

j. Personality(m) and the Termination Thesis.

The present version of the Argument from Personality looks like this:

1. When a person(m) dies, he or she loses the property of being a person(m).
2. When a person(m) loses the property of being a person(m), he or she ceases to exist.
3. Therefore, when a person(m) dies, he or she ceases to exist.

In this form, the argument is completely unpersuasive. Premise (1) says (in effect) that when you die, you lose your right to life. I cannot see why that would have to be true. It would depend upon the feature that grounds this right. If we come to have this right simply in virtue of our being members of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, then we would go on having it even while dead. If we come to have it as a result of something that’s lost at death (such as the ability to suffer) then we would lose it at death. Since I don’t know why we have the right to life (assuming that we have it in the first place) I am in no position to judge whether we would necessarily lose it at death.

But several popular views about the right to life imply that (2) is false. Consider the idea that you have the right to life in virtue of the fact that you have the capacity to value your own life. That’s what makes you be a person(m). Suppose that as the result of a blow to the head, you become unconscious and lose the capacity to value your own life. It surely does not follow that you would then go out of existence.

Suppose you have the right to life in virtue of being a morally decent person. Suppose you then commit a series of horrific crimes. Suppose that as a result of this you lose your right to life. Then you no longer have a serious right to life and so you are no

longer a person(m). But you still exist. You might be sitting there in your cell on Death Row.

If the serious right to life depends upon any property that can be lost while its former bearer continues to exist, then the serious right to life can be lost in the same way. In that case, something that has been a person(m) could cease being a person(m) without ceasing to exist. (2) would in that case be false and the Argument from Personality would again fail.

Conclusion

I have no clear conception of what personality is. Some of the conceptions I have discussed here seem to me to be decidedly implausible.²⁹ Nevertheless some conclusions can be drawn: if personality is a matter of species membership, then people can continue to exist even after death. The Argument from Personality would then fail at premise (1). If personality is a matter of psychology, then people stop being people when they die, but this gives us no reason to suppose that they must go out of existence when they lose their personality(p). So again the Argument from Personality would fail, but this time at premise (2). If personality is a moral concept, then it might be reasonable to say that people stop being people when they die; but there would be no reason to say that people go out of existence when they lose their personalities(m). The details would depend, in this case, on what we take to be the basis for our moral right to life. But in any case, the Argument from Personality would fail.

²⁹ I should clarify this. When I say that I find many of these views to be implausible, what I mean is that *if they are offered as accounts of, or analyses of, or precisifications of, or explications of any concept ordinary people have in mind when they speak of "persons"* then I cannot imagine why anyone would believe them. If they are mere stipulations – if the cited philosophers are just telling us that they have chosen to use the word ‘person’ to mean the same as ‘second order intentional system’ or whatever -- then of course I would not say that the stipulation is implausible. I would just say that the philosophers in question have chosen a tremendously misleading way of expressing themselves.

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