

The Termination Thesis

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1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Termination Thesis (or “TT”) is the view that people go out of existence when they die. Lots of philosophers seem to believe it. Epicurus, for example, apparently makes use of TT in his efforts to show that it is irrational to fear death. He says, “as long as we exist, death is not with us; but when death comes, then we do not exist.”¹ Lucretius says pretty much the same thing, but in many more words and more poetically: “Death therefore to us is nothing, concerns us not a jot, since the nature of the mind is proved to be mortal; . . . when we shall be no more, when there shall have been a separation of body and soul, out of both of which we are each formed into a single being, to us, you may be sure, who then shall be no more, nothing whatever can happen to excite sensation.”²

A considerably clearer and more economical statement of TT can be found in L. W. Sumner’s “A Matter of Life and Death.” Sumner says, “The death of a person is the end of that person; before death he *is* and after death he *is not*. To die is therefore to cease to exist.”³

In John Martin Fischer’s recent anthology of papers on the metaphysics of death, there are many passages in which philosophers seem to endorse TT. The philosophers in question appeal to it for a variety of purposes and often do not agree about its significance. One fairly good example is Thomas Nagel, who puts it in the antecedent of a conditional in the first sentence of his essay, though I think he provisionally endorses it elsewhere: “If death is the unequivocal and permanent end of our existence, then the question arises whether it is a bad thing to die.”⁴ Other “terminators” in the Fischer anthology include Harry Silverstein,⁵ Stephen Rosenbaum,⁶ Palle Yourgrau,⁷ Steven Luper-Foy,⁸ and Joel Feinberg.⁹

In his book *Thinking Clearly about Death*, Jay Rosenberg presents a vigorous endorsement of TT. This comes out in a preliminary way in his discussion of Aunt

Ethel and her corpse. Rosenberg seems to want to say that when she dies, Aunt Ethel goes out of existence, and her corpse comes into existence.¹⁰ Rosenberg devotes several chapters to an argument designed to show that “we cannot make coherent sense of the supposed possibility that a person’s history might continue beyond that person’s death.”¹¹ I believe that this is Rosenberg’s way of expressing an idea equivalent to TT.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF TT

It’s interesting to note that TT has been invoked on both sides of the debate about the evil of death. Epicurus, Lucretius, Rosenbaum, and others maintain that it is irrational to fear death. They claim that death cannot harm us. They make use of TT in their arguments. They claim (approximately) that since we cease to exist when we die, and nothing can harm us when we don’t exist, death cannot harm us. Thus, it is irrational to fear death. So TT is sometimes brought in as part of an argument intended to show that death is not to be feared.

But the very same metaphysical principle is sometimes employed in the effort to explain the horror of death. Luper-Foy, for example, insists emphatically that death can be a great evil, especially if it comes prematurely. Part of the evil of death as he sees it is that when we die, we are “annihilated.” We go utterly out of existence. When we no longer exist, we are incapable of pursuing the projects that give meaning to our lives. Thus, death harms us.¹²

TT occupies a central position in a number of other more purely metaphysical issues concerning death. There is, for example, the question whether psychological connectedness is the mark of personal identity. It has been suggested that if people continue to exist without psychology after they die, then a person might be identical to some later thing (a corpse) with which the person is psychologically unconnected. Another question is whether we can live again after we have died. TT seems relevant. For if we go out of existence when we die, then a return to life would seem to involve a return to existence after a period of nonexistence. Some metaphysicians find this sort of “gappy” existence intolerable. There is also a question about the relation between a person and his “remains.” Is this relation identity, or is it rather a relation that holds between an entity and another entity into which the former has “substantially changed”?¹³ If we accept TT, we seem committed to saying that no one is identical to his remains. There is also a familiar line of argument against a form of materialism: “people go out of existence when they die; their bodies often survive. Therefore, people cannot be identified with their bodies.” The appeal to TT in the first premise should be obvious.

In any case, it should be clear that TT plays some role in a variety of important metaphysical debates.

3. POSSIBLE MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF TT

A

It’s easy to mistake TT for the view that when a person dies, he or she ceases to exist “as a person.” If we understand the concept of a person in such a way that in order to

be a person at some time, something must be alive or self-conscious, or morally responsible for his or her own actions at that time, then materialists will be in general agreement that *people cease to exist as persons when they die*. This doctrine follows immediately from the assumption about the concept of personality and the fact that people cease to be alive or self-conscious when they die. So the doctrine that people cease to exist as persons (in any such sense) when they die is relatively uncontroversial.¹⁴ But this view is distinct from TT, for TT is not the view that people cease to exist “as people” when they die. It is the view that they cease to exist *simpliciter* when they die.

Let’s say that something ceases to exist *simpliciter* at a time if it simply goes out of existence at that time. In the typical case, a thing ceases to exist *simpliciter* at a time if it exists for a while up to that time, but exists no longer after that time. On the other hand, in the typical case we can say that something ceases to exist *as a person* at a time if it was a person for a while up to that time but stopped being a person then. Making use of these expressions, we can formulate a pair of principles:

TTs: When a person dies, he or she ceases to exist *simpliciter*.

TTp: When a person dies, he or she ceases to exist as a person.

When I speak here of the Termination Thesis, I mean something like TTs, not something like TTp.¹⁵

B

It’s also easy to confuse TT with the view that when a person dies, he or she ceases to have any sort of moral or psychological importance. Someone might say that he hates the thought of his own death because he hates the thought of ceasing to be of any moral importance—ceasing to be “morally considerable.” Another might say that he hates the thought of his own death because being dead will be, from his own perspective, as empty and as meaningless as not existing at all. Such a person might take himself to be endorsing TT.

However, TT is not a doctrine directly about moral or psychological or other importance. It is not any claim of this sort:

TTi: When a person dies, he or she ceases to have any moral or other significance; being dead is as meaningless as not existing at all.

Rather, TT is the view that people simply stop existing when they die. It’s not the claim that being dead is as meaningless as not existing; it’s the claim that when you are dead, you don’t exist at all. If not being there makes you meaningless, then death will make you meaningless. But TT does not say that. It just says that you won’t be there.

C

I have heard people say things like this: “When I die, I will no longer exist. I will just be a corpse.” Such a remark seems self-contradictory. If the speaker will exist as a corpse after his death, then he will exist. So he shouldn’t say both (a) that he won’t

exist and (b) that he will be a corpse. Perhaps the thought can be expressed more clearly in this way: “When I die, I will no longer exist *as the same sort of thing I am now*. Instead, I will exist merely as a corpse.” It may seem that someone who says this means to be endorsing a version of the Termination Thesis.

However, the quoted remark is not a formulation of TT. The quoted remark is inconsistent with TT. For in the first place, TT is not the view that when people die, they cease existing *as the same kind of thing they formerly were*. TT says nothing about “existence as a kind of thing.” Rather, TT implies that when a person dies, he or she ceases existing as any kind of thing, since he or she ceases existing altogether. And in the second place, if a person goes on existing as a corpse after death, then he or she most certainly does go on existing. If you exist as a corpse, then you exist. In that case, TT is false, since TT implies that when people die they don’t go on existing as anything.

4. WHY I THINK TT IS FALSE

I have many reasons for thinking that TT is false. I want to mention some of these. It may appear that I am here presenting *arguments* against TT. But that’s not my aim. I know that those who accept TT (the “terminators”) will not be moved by my remarks. I know that they will have TT-consistent redescriptions of the phenomena that I describe. I mention these reasons in an effort to remind the reader of the extent to which our ordinary talk and thought about death seem to presuppose that people go on existing (though perhaps not as people anymore) after they die.

A

In a field behind my house there stands a huge old elm tree. It has been dead for many years. I suppose it was a victim of the so-called Dutch Elm Disease. I also suppose that the tree was well over fifty years old at the time of its death. I doubt that anyone would want to say that the large arboreal object currently in the field never lived or that it came into existence just a few years ago when the elm tree died. Virtually everyone would agree, I think, that this now-dead tree is more than fifty years old and that it previously lived. Careful study of the annual rings might seem to confirm these estimates of age and former life. If this is right, and people would say the same thing about other dead trees, then virtually everyone would agree that trees don’t go out of existence when they die.

It seems to me that what’s true of trees is true of every other sort of organism. In every case, if an organism dies, but its remains remain, then it remains. The transition from being alive to being dead is a transition that happens to *some persisting object*. If we assume that people are organisms too, then these thoughts provide reason to suppose that TT is false. For if all other organisms have the capacity to continue in existence past their deaths, then why should people be different?

B

I sometimes wander through graveyards. I see many gravestones. On these stones I often see the words “Here lies” followed by the name of the deceased. I believe that

in many cases the claim inscribed on the gravestone is true. The deceased does indeed lie (dead) in the grave. Of course, if it is a very old grave there is a good chance that the deceased no longer lies there. Perhaps he has rotted away and returned to the dust whence he came. The fact that so many of these inscriptions seem plausible demonstrates the pervasiveness of the idea that people do not go out of existence when they die. For if people went out of existence when they died, there would never be a case in which some formerly living person lies dead in his grave. Every “Here lies” would be a lie.

C

I believe in a sort of straightforward materialism about people. I think we are our bodies. If this sort of materialism is true, then I am my body. In that case, I must have the same history as my body. Since my body will go on existing for a while after I die (unless I die in a remarkably violent way), I will go on existing after I die. Of course, I will then be dead. I will not be conscious. Perhaps I will not even be a person any more. But I will be there. You can’t get rid of me so easily. So TT seems to me to be false.

D

In some cases there is reason to wonder about why a person died. Perhaps there is a suspicion of foul play. Perhaps there is doubt about the nature of some illness or injury. In these cases, a medical examiner might perform an autopsy. By looking closely at details of the corpse, the examiner hopes to learn more about what happened to the person who died. I can imagine a medical examiner uncovering a long-embedded bullet and saying, “This is the bullet that struck him twenty years ago. It lodged here near his heart, and the surgeons felt at the time that it would be safer just to let it stay put. It has remained here in the same place for all these years. He died of a stroke.”

The remarks of this imaginary medical examiner seem perfectly acceptable to me. I can readily imagine that there might be a person who is hit by a bullet on one occasion and then later dies as a result of a stroke. I can readily imagine that an autopsy might be performed on this dead person and that the medical examiner might then remove the long-embedded bullet. The object that formerly was a living person still exists—now as a corpse—and still contains the bullet. If such a thing could happen, then TT is false.

E

A friend of mine lived with her elderly mother. One morning, my friend found her mother sitting in her accustomed chair, apparently resting. My friend spoke to her mother, encouraging her to have some breakfast. The mother did not respond. Eventually my friend became concerned and checked more closely. She found that her mother had been dead all the while.

My description of this example implies that TT is false. For if TT were true, my friend could not have spoken to her mother and could not have encouraged her

mother to have some breakfast. Nor could she have discovered that her mother was dead. For if TT were true, the object in the chair that morning was not my friend's mother. My friend's mother would have gone out of existence sometime during the night, only to be replaced by some strange entity never before seen by my friend. Yet my description of the case seems perfectly natural and appropriate.

F

Imagine a case in which a person was dressed in a tight-fitting, hard-to-button suit at the time of death. The corpse is discovered dressed in the same outfit. It might seem that none of the buttons has been undone. The zippers are untouched. No alien fingerprints are found on the clothing. How did the person get out of the suit without unbuttoning the buttons and unzipping the zippers? How did the corpse get in there? If TT is true, these things must have happened. I find it far more reasonable to suppose that there were no entrances and exits in this case. I find it far more reasonable to suppose that the person died in the tight-fitting suit and then later the very same object (no longer living and perhaps no longer a person, but still the same object) was found in the suit. Thus, I find it more reasonable to deny TT.

5. SOME ARGUMENTS FOR THE TERMINATION THESIS

Why would anyone think that TT is true? Some apparently have thought that the very concept of death itself entails that TT is true. Suppose someone thought that the concept of death is the concept of *the annihilation of a living organism*.¹⁶ Then there would be a quick argument to the conclusion that people go out of existence when they die:

1. x dies at $t = df.$ x is a living organism up to t & x is annihilated at t .
2. If (1) is true, then people go out of existence when they die.
3. Therefore, people go out of existence when they die.

The argument is valid. The conclusion is TT. But surely no one should be impressed by the argument. The proposed definition of “ x dies at t ” clearly presupposes the very doctrine that is here under debate. Antiterminators will simply reject it. In any case, the proposed definition is independently implausible.¹⁷

Other lines of argument for TT depend more heavily on alleged features of the concept of *being a person* or what I will call “*personality*.” It might be claimed that in order for something to be a person it must have the first-person perspective,¹⁸ or that in order for something to be a person it must have rationality, intentionality, the capacity to treat others as persons, the capacity to engage in verbal communication, and consciousness.¹⁹ Other claims about personality might be made, but I will let this list suffice. They provide a basis for another argument for TT:

1. When a person dies, he or she ceases to be a person.
2. When a person ceases to be a person, he or she ceases to exist.
3. Therefore, when a person dies, he or she ceases to exist.

In this argument, the alleged necessary conditions of personality provide the basis for the first premise. It is widely agreed (especially among materialists) that people lose their first-person perspectives, their rationality, their ability to engage in verbal communication, and so on when they die. Thus, if these are necessary conditions of personality, then death robs us of our personalities. We cease being persons (in this sense) when we die.

The second premise is more problematic. Why should we think that people cease to exist when they cease to be people? Someone might take note of the fact that “person” is a sortal predicate.²⁰ They might think that where *F* is a sortal predicate, statements of this form are all true:

S: When an *F* ceases to be an *F*, it ceases to exist.

For this reason, they might argue, the second premise of the argument has to be true.

However, the general line of reasoning here is flawed. There are many sortals for which S is wrong. Consider, for example, “student,” “virgin,” “ABD,” “recruit,” “child.” Each of these is a sortal (according to typical criteria of sortality), and none of them supports S. Surely no one will want to say that virgins go out of existence when they lose their virginity! So the mere fact that “person” is a sortal (if indeed it is) does not guarantee that persons go out of existence when they lose their personality.

David Wiggins has provided a useful distinction between “substance sortals” and “phase sortals.”²¹ Roughly, the distinction is just that substance sortals are ones that verify S; phase sortals are the rest. “Virgin” is just a phase sortal. That explains why virgins can survive the loss of their virginity. But “person” is supposed to be a substance sortal. Thus, line (2) is true (it might be argued).

Although the argument would be bolstered if it could be shown that “person” is a substance sortal, the bare claim seems to stand in need of defense. Surely we have to *show* that “person” is a substance sortal first. And this requires showing first that persons go out of existence when they cease being persons. Some will want to insist that “person” is a phase sortal. They will claim that in some cases it is literally true that some human body formerly was a person but now is reduced to a mere parcel of moldering flesh.

Furthermore, it’s not so clear that people do stop being people when they die. We certainly speak of “dead people,” as for example when we say that dozens of dead people were found in the rubble after the earthquake.²² Thus, it’s not clear that line (1) is true either. This version of the argument from personality fails.

In his recent book, *The Human Animal*, Eric Olson defends his form of “animalism.” According to this view, each of us is fundamentally an animal—a living human organism. Olson shows (persuasively, in my opinion) that animalism is incompatible with the view that personal identity is to be explained in terms of psychological connectedness. For in the first place an animal pretty clearly can persist through dramatic and irreversible psychological disruptions. And in the second place, in transplant and teleportation cases there would be psychological connection, but there would be no identity of animals. If we are animals, there would be no identity of us.

In a typical case, a person is temporally flanked by items of questionable personality. Prior to the time at which someone is clearly a person, there is a fetus. Without begging any question about identity, we can say that the fetus “develops into the person.” At the other end of life, again without begging any questions, we can say that the person “degenerates into a corpse.” Olson’s form of animalism involves the view that the person is strictly identical to the fetus but strictly diverse from the corpse. Thus, although Olson seems happy to say that the very same entity can be a nonpsychological non-“personal” bundle of immature cells at one time and a thriving person at a later time, he seems unwilling to say that the very same entity can be a thriving person at one time and a fresh corpse at another.

This combination of views seems strange. If I am an animal, and I can exist without psychology as a fetus, why can’t I exist without life as a corpse? Surely there are plenty of dead animals. Doesn’t this mean that there are plenty of items that formerly were living animals and that now are still animals but dead? Olson rejects this suggestion and hints at an argument for TT. Olson says this:

The changes that go on in an animal when it dies are really quite dramatic. All of that frenetic, highly organized, and extremely complex biochemical activity that was going on throughout the organism comes to a rather sudden end, and the chemical machinery begins immediately to decay. If it looks like there isn’t all that much difference between a living animal and fresh corpse, that is because the most striking changes take place at the microscopic level and below. Think of it this way: If there is such a thing as your body, it must cease to exist at *some* point (or during some vague period) between now and a millions years from now, when there will be nothing left of you but dust. The most salient and most dramatic change that takes place during that history would seem to be your death. Everything that happens between death and dust (assuming that your remains rest peacefully) is only slow, gradual decay. So whatever objects there may be that your atoms now compose, it is plausible to suppose that they cease to exist no later than your death. There is no obvious reason to suppose that any 150-pound object persists through that change.²³

This is an astonishing passage. Surely in every case in which a 150-pound person dies and leaves a 150-pound corpse, there are plenty of obvious reasons to suppose that a certain 150-pound object persists through the change from being alive to being dead. I mentioned several of these earlier. I can mention one more: suppose a terminally ill 150-pound person is resting on a sensitive scale when he dies. Suppose he dies peacefully, so that the needle of the scale does not move. It pointed to “150” before he died, and it continued to point to “150” when and after he died. It did not even quiver at the moment of death. It would have been hard to remove the person and replace him with an equally heavy corpse. It would have been nearly impossible to do this without causing the needle on the scale to move. Since the needle did not move, there is at least some *prima facie* reason to suppose that some 150-pound object persisted through the change.²⁴

The passage from Olson contains hints of two lines of argument for TT. One of these concerns what we may call without further explanation “big changes.” Following Olson, we can imagine some case in which a 150-pound person dies. The body gradually rots away. After a hundred years, there is just a skin and bones; the flesh has been removed by maggots. After a thousand years, there is just a dry skeleton; after ten thousand years there is just some scattered dust. Olson’s remarks suggest an argument according to which the thing that was the person did exist when the person was alive but does not exist at all after ten thousand years; there must have been a time when that object went out of existence. The big changes all took place at the moment of death. Therefore, the thing that was the person went out of existence at the moment of death.

I see no reason to agree that the object in question goes out of existence at the moment of those “big changes.” For all Olson has said, it might be that the object *dies* at the moment of “big changes” but continues *existing* as a corpse for several thousand years. No particular reason is given to suppose that there is a link between those “big changes” and the termination of existence.

The passage from Olson suggests a slightly different line of thought. It may be difficult to pin down the precise moment when the corpse ceases to exist. Perhaps the best we can say in such cases is that the corpse ceases to exist (as Olson puts it) “during some vague period.” The notion that a person might go out of existence “during some vague period” may be unsettling. We may feel that it would be tidier if there were some well-defined first moment of nonexistence for people. Perhaps this gives us some reason to look around for a more salient moment to identify as the moment when the person ceases to exist. The moment of death suggests itself as salient. Big changes occur then. It’s relatively easy to identify. At least, it’s easier to identify than the “moment” when the corpse goes out of existence. Thus we may be inclined to say that the things that are people go out of existence when they die.

But the corpse is a genuine thing; it exists for a while and then ceases to exist at or during some time.²⁵ So there must be some time (or vague period) when the corpse goes out of existence. If it was metaphysically untidy to have persons with vague terminations, it will be equally untidy to have corpses with vague terminations. Yet we have them. Nothing Olson says prohibits our saying that this is the time (or vague period) when the thing that formerly was the person finally ceases to exist.²⁶

Another line of argument for TT is based on the idea that certain essential properties are lost at death. If the property of *being alive*, for example, were an essential property of the things that have it, then it would follow that something goes out of existence whenever something loses its life. Different philosophers have appealed to different properties in a similar way. Thus, for example, Lynne Baker claims that *having a first-person perspective* is an essential property of each person.²⁷ She thinks (reasonably, in my opinion) that people lose their first-person perspectives when they die; from this she infers that people go out of existence when they die.

Baker’s view is that each thing that really is a person is such that it is metaphysically impossible for that thing to exist at any time without having a first-person perspective. I cannot believe this. I think most little babies gradually come to have the first-person perspective. In the standard case, the baby exists for a while without the first-person perspective, and then the very same item—the thing that was the

baby—comes to have a first-person perspective. If this happens, then Baker's essentialist claim is false.²⁸ Similarly, if someone falls off his motorcycle and strikes his head on the pavement, he may lose his first-person perspective for a while. It's hard to see why this would mean the end of his existence, especially if he later recovers and regains his first-person perspective.

Someone (though not Baker) might confuse her thesis with the less controversial claim that it is metaphysically impossible for a thing to be a person at a time without having a first-person perspective at that time.²⁹ Those who reject TT can happily accept this view. They can say that when people die, they lose their first-person perspectives; they can agree that it follows that they then also lose the property of *being people*. But they can say that the very things that formerly had a first-person perspective and that were people continue to exist after ceasing to be people and ceasing to have a first-person perspective. (For those who see things that way, "person" is a phase sortal.)

My own view is that even this benign thesis is open to objection. I think there are plenty of people who do not have the first-person perspective. I cite my nephew Douglas as an example. Douglas was very seriously injured in an automobile accident and now lies nearly motionless in a nursing home. Though it is hard to tell for sure, it seems very likely that Douglas has lost his first-person perspective. He seems to be in a deep coma. Yet he's still a person—a comatose person, to be sure, but a person nevertheless. (How could he be my nephew if he were not a person? Why would the insurance company keep paying his bills if he were not a person? Why would my sister visit and talk to him if he were not a person?)³⁰

Let me draw a general conclusion about essential properties and TT. Suppose some philosopher identifies some property, *C*, that healthy living people typically have but lose at death. (Any of a number of psychological properties will do.) She then claims that *C* is essential to people. On this basis she concludes that people go out of existence when they die.

The problem with any such argument, as I see it, is that the central premise is question-begging. Since I assume that people are their bodies, and I already know that *C* is lost at death, I will be disinclined to accept the notion that *C* is essential to persons. I will of course admit that people typically have *C* while they are living people. I may even grant the truth of some modal claim such as the claim that it is necessary that if something is a person at a time, then it has *C* at that time. But I will deny that each person, *x*, is such that necessarily *x* has *C* at every time that *x* exists. For I will think that some things that are people go on existing as corpses without *C*. The argument from essential properties gets us nowhere.

6. PERSONAL TEMPORAL SEGMENTS

A philosopher might try to construct a metaphysical scheme that will force TT to come out true. He could start by adopting a metaphysical principle:

TP: If a physical object lasts through a stretch of time, then for every substretch of that time, it has a temporal segment that lasts precisely through that substretch.

Consider some human body. Suppose it lasts for a hundred years. Suppose it is fetal for the first few months, then infantile, then adolescent, then mature, then elderly, and then dead for a while. We could say that for each of these phases, there is a temporal segment of the body that lasts just through that phase. So in addition to the body, there are (a) the fetus-segment, (b) the infant-segment, (c) the adolescent-segment, (d) the mature-segment, (e) the elderly-segment, and finally (f) the dead-segment.

None of these temporal segments is strictly identical to the body. Their diversity follows from their differences in temporal extent. But of course it would be somewhat misleading to say, for example, that the mature-segment is a “completely different thing” from the body. It would be overly contentious and a bit silly to pretend to be astonished by the fact that when you put the body and the mature-segment on a scale, the scale does not indicate some weight many times greater than the weight of the body. After all, each of these items is a proper (temporal) part of the body. They have a lot in common with the body, and they bear important metaphysical relations to it. Just as a scale does not indicate the sum of your weight and the weights of all your spatial parts at a time, so it should not indicate the sum of your weight and the weights of all your temporal parts at a time.

Our imagined philosopher might then introduce some argumentation designed to show that some property is crucial to personality. He might claim, for example, that *having the first-person perspective* is such a property. He might say that something is a person at a time if and only if it has the first-person perspective at that time. As I have indicated, I am dubious about this choice of “person-making property.” In order to move forward, let us agree to speak more abstractly here of the feature in virtue of which something is a person at a time. Let us assume that some psychological feature has been selected. This may be *having the first-person perspective*; it might be *being capable of engaging in voluntary action*; it might be something else. In any case, some allegedly person-making feature has been chosen. Then our philosopher might ask us to focus on a certain type of temporal segment. Specifically, she asks us to focus on a temporal segment of the body that lasts throughout the period during which the person-making feature is exemplified. The metaphysical principle cited above ensures that there is such a segment. Any such segment is a temporal segment of a human body, but it differs from other such segments in virtue of the fact that it is alleged to be a person throughout its existence.

In the case of each human body, the selected temporal segment has some interesting features. For one thing, it has the person-making feature at every moment of its existence. For another, it comes into existence when the person-making property arises, and it goes out of existence when the person-making feature terminates. Clearly, if such a segment dies at some time, it will lose its person-making feature at that time. It will then terminate when it dies. This temporal segment may appear to be precisely the sort of “person” some have imagined—an entity with the person-making feature, an entity that goes out of existence when it dies, but nevertheless an entity that is a purely material object made of human cells, tissues, and organs.

If the philosopher wants to expand on his view, he can go on to offer some commentary on the data mentioned above. He can say that of course there are “dead people.” But on his view all talk of dead people is slightly loose, for as he sees it, it

would be more accurate to say that there are dead human bodies former segments of which were people. He can say that there is an obvious truth to the claim that we perform an autopsy on a corpse to find out why it died, even though the corpse itself was never living. The underlying truth, in his view, is that we perform an autopsy on a body at a time when it is dead (when else?) in order to find out why it died. When we do this, we inevitably do it at a time when the corpse is also present and at a time when the person is no longer present. But there is no mystery here. The person is an earlier, no-longer-present segment of the body. The corpse is a later, not-previously-present segment of the body. The coroner's interest is in what happened to the body.

The view just described may seem to ensure that something like the Termination Thesis is true. However, the situation is somewhat more complex. The view does not have the implication it may seem to have.

One problem that affects the described view is that it implies that we are never alone; wherever there is a person, there are many clones. First, note that as the view was described, there are as many distinct temporal parts of a human body as there are distinct stretches of time during which that body exists. Given that many of these stretches overlap, it follows that at any moment during the history of a body, there will be indefinitely many distinct but overlapping temporal segments present.

As I described the imagined view above, it involves the notion that some psychological property such as *having a first-person perspective* is sufficient for personality. I called this "the person-making property." Anything that has the person-making feature at a time is a person at that time. This was supposed to explain why the selected segment—the one that ends at death—was supposed to be a person at every moment of its existence. Yet if this is sufficient to make something a person at a time, then it surely follows that many of the overlapping temporal segments are also persons during various stretches of their existence.

In order to see this more clearly, let us consider a certain temporal part of a human body that definitely *does not* go out of existence at death. For this purpose, we may consider a temporal part that starts at conception and continues to exist until the body disintegrates into a disorganized array of dust particles. Call this part "B" (for "body"). In addition, consider the temporal part that starts existing at the moment when the person-making feature initially arises and terminates at death, when the person-making feature ceases. Call this part "P" (for "person"). Now consider the long period of time during which both B and P seem to be present.

Throughout this period of time, B and P are atom-for-atom duplicates. At each moment during this time, B and P are exactly alike with respect to all intrinsic properties. Most importantly, they are exactly alike with respect to brain structure and activity. Every brain cell in P's brain is also a brain cell in B's brain; every neuronal firing in P's brain is a neuronal firing in B's brain. I assume that P has the person-making feature in virtue of things that are going on P's brain. It has a certain structure. Certain events occur in that brain. Other things are dispositional: P's brain is such that if it were affected in such-and-such ways, it would react in such-and-such ways. Given these physical facts about P's brain (and the relevant laws of neuropsychology), it follows that P has the person-making feature.

But since B is an atom-for-atom duplicate of P, it then also follows that B has the person-making feature at every moment that P has it. Given the assumption that

the mental supervenes on the physical and the fact that B is physically indiscernible from P, they cannot differ with respect to the possession of the person-making feature. In this case, at every moment at which they both exist, B is just as much a person as P is (given the assumption that the possession of a person-making feature makes something a person at a time).

The upshot of all this is that the proposed metaphysical scheme implies that some persons (temporal segments relevantly like P) go out of existence when they die. “Person” acts like a substance sortal for such things. But the same scheme also implies that other things that are persons during some parts of their existence do not go out of existence when they die. Things such as B are persons for long stretches of time (throughout the time that P exists), but these things do not go out of existence when they die. For them, “person” acts like a phase sortal. As a result, the imagined metaphysical scheme does not serve to establish TT. Some persons continue to exist after they die; they just stop being persons and start being dead human bodies.

7. A MORE RADICAL APPROACH

Another philosopher might take a more radical approach.³¹ He might say that as he uses the term “person,” it correctly applies to a thing only if that thing has the person-making property *throughout its existence*. Furthermore, he might insist that nothing is properly called a person unless it is “maximal” in this sense: it is not a proper temporal part of any larger segment that has the person-making property throughout its existence. Thus, from the fact that B has the person-making property for ninety years, nothing follows about the personality of B. B’s problem, on this view, is that it lacked the person-making property during some fetal stretches prior to the ninety-year stretch and also during some post mortem stretches after the ninety-year stretch. So on the present view, although B had the person-making property steadily for ninety years, B was not a person. P was a person, however, because P had the person-making property at every moment during which P existed and is not a proper part of any larger such thing. No temporal segment of P is a person because each such segment is part of a larger segment that has the person-making property throughout its existence.³²

There is a complexity, however. The radical philosopher will probably want to distinguish between two sorts of personality. One is the “absolute” property of *being a person*. The other is a time-relativized variant: the property of *being a person at a time*. On the view in question, P is the only absolute person in the story. B is not an absolute person. On the other hand, at every time at which B has the person-making property, B has the time-relativized property. For all such times *t*, B is a person-at-*t*.

This more radical view does ensure that something like TT is true. On this view each absolute person has the person-making feature at every moment of its existence; it is not a proper temporal part of any larger such thing. When an absolute person dies, he or she loses the person-making feature. He or she therefore ceases to exist. A form of TT is true. This form of TT may be understood in this way:

TTa: When an absolute person dies, he or she ceases to exist.

It is important to take note of the fact that, according to this view, whenever an absolute person is present, many other items are also present. This follows from the metaphysical principle TP: If an object exists during a stretch of time, then a temporal part of that object precisely occupies every substretch of that time. This is the principle that guarantees that there is a temporal part that begins when the person-making feature begins and ends when it ends. As a result, the view is committed to the notion that whenever a human body is present, infinitely many temporal segments of that body are also present. These segments are alike in having a component that exists just at the moment; they differ in their temporal extents. Some started earlier; some started later; some will end earlier; some will end later.

On the radical view, the absolute person himself is just one of these temporal segments of his body. It is the unique segment that begins to exist when the person-making property begins to be instantiated in the body and ends when that property ceases being instantiated. The body as a whole is not an absolute person. No other segment is an absolute person. At best, such other segments overlap a person.³³ They are things that are persons-at-times but not absolute persons.

Since many of these persons-at-times go on existing after death, another version of the Termination Thesis turns out to be false on this view:

TTtr: When something that has been a person-at-some-times dies, he or she ceases to exist.

This version of TT is false because, for example, in a typical case a person's body is a person-at-many-times during the life of the person and does not cease to exist when the person dies. So it turns out that even this radical conception of persons does not make TT come out unequivocally true.

I think it's interesting to see that the radical view does not guarantee the truth of a certain further version of TT.

On the present metaphysical scheme, there are many items passing through this location where I am. Among these are the many temporal segments currently coinciding with me. Some are items of tiny temporal extent, such as the instantaneous current temporal stage of my body. Others are items of greater temporal extent, such as the stage that began on my thirteenth birthday and will terminate when I die. Another is my body, which began to exist when I was conceived and which (let us assume) will continue to exist until some vague period long after my death when it disintegrates.

Now I want to tell you a little about myself. I think I am my body. I think I formerly was a fetus. I think someday I will be dead—just a corpse. When I refer to myself, I mean to be referring to *this human body*—the one that is writing this essay; the one with these memories and hopes and self-awareness. I do not mean to be referring to some mere temporal segment of (what I take to be) myself. As in the case in which I refer to something with a demonstrative, such as “that,” I think I have a certain amount of power to determine what I am referring to when I refer to something with “I.” Since I mean to be referring to my body when I say “I,” I think it is correct for me to say that I am this body.

My sense of myself is not utterly off the wall. I have discussed this point with friends. I am convinced that many others use the word “I” in a relevantly similar way.

When they refer to themselves, they take themselves to be referring to their currently living human bodies. Like me, these friends think that they formerly were fetuses and will someday be corpses. They see nothing odd in imagining times in the past when they lacked the person-making feature—indeed, times when they lacked all psychological properties. They also see nothing odd in imagining times in the future when they will exist but again will lack all psychological properties. These are times when they will be dead.

The radical view grants that the thing I call “me” exists. Advocates of the radical view may call such things “human bodies.” But the radical view insists that these entities are not absolute persons. They are temporally larger items that contain absolute persons as proper temporal segments. The radical view implies that many of my human friends are not absolute people. It implies that when we refer to ourselves by saying such things as “I am thinking of death,” we are self-referring to things that are not absolute people. We are referring and ascribing the thought, according to the theory, to things that are “too big to be absolute people.”

I am willing to grant that there might be some people who think of themselves otherwise. Perhaps when one of them uses the word “I” to refer to himself, he means to refer to an entity that will go out of existence at death. I have no way to prove that they cannot be doing this. If they do this, they are thinking of themselves as things that are, on my view, mere parts of things like me and my friends. But I won’t impose my conceptual scheme on them. If that’s what they take themselves to be, then so be it. (Perhaps they should be called “short people.”) And I grant that the objects to which these people refer when they use “I” will go out of existence when they die. But I beg them to be equally tolerant of me and my friends. They should grant us the right to refer to what we take to be ourselves when we use the word “I.” And if they grant us this privilege, then they have to admit that yet another version of the Termination Thesis is false: This is the version that says that *things like us go out of existence when they die*. This version is false because my friends and I are things like us, and we won’t go out of existence when we die.³⁴

NOTES

1. Epicurus (1940): 31.
2. Lucretius (1940): 131.
3. Sumner (1976): 153.
4. Nagel (1979): 61.
5. Silverstein (1980): 100.
6. Rosenbaum (1986): 120.
7. Yourgrau (1987): 137.
8. Luper-Foy (1987): 270.
9. Feinberg (1984): 171.
10. Rosenberg (1983): 27.
11. Rosenberg (1983): 96.
12. Luper-Foy (1987): 289.
13. There are more options. Some are discussed below.
14. I think the doctrine is multiply ambiguous. On some readings it seems to me to be true; on others false. I discuss its various senses in “Death and Personality,” pp. 118–123 of my (1992).

15. Some philosophers claim that personality is an essential property of each person. If personality is an essential property of persons, then persons would go out of existence when they stop being persons. Thus, we have a possible argument from TTp to TTs. I discuss some versions of this idea below.

16. Roy Perrett says something quite like this on p. 14 of his (1987).

17. In (1992) I explained why I take the proposed definition to be implausible. I mentioned a careful butterfly collector who captures, kills, and mounts her butterflies without damaging so much as a microscopic scale. I said that the butterflies in her collection have all died, but none has been annihilated. See my (1992): 59.

18. Lynne Baker presents an extended account of the first-person perspective in her (1998): 327–348. In (1999b) she says, “A first-person perspective is the defining characteristic of all persons, human or not” (p. 3).

19. Daniel Dennett says all of these things (and one more) in his (1976): 177–178.

20. The concept of sortal has been around for a long time, but in modern history, Wiggins is often cited as responsible for reviving interest. He in turn credits Aristotle, Locke, and Strawson for introducing and developing the concept. See his (1980): 7–8. For detailed discussion of some attempts to explain the concept of a sortal predicate, see my (1973): 268–282.

21. See Wiggins (1980): 24–27. In fact, Wiggins uses the term “phased sortal,” but I think my usage has by now become more familiar.

22. Judith Thomson makes essentially this point in her (1997). She asks (p. 202) why there is anything wrong with supposing that there are dead cats and dead people in a house after the roof falls in. I also mentioned dead people (and compared them with dead cats discovered after a natural disaster) in my (1992), p. 104.

23. Olson (1997): 151–152. In fairness to Olson, I should point out that he is not explicitly discussing the argument of which I find hints in the passage. Olson seems to be engaged in trying to show that there is no such thing as “my body.”

24. I say that this is “at least a prima facie reason” to say that something persisted; I do not say that it is conclusive proof. But in light of such facts as the fact about the needle (and facts like the ones mentioned earlier) I think there is a substantial burden of proof on anyone who maintains that *no 150 pound object persists through the changes*.

25. It’s not clear to me that Olson believes that the corpse is a genuine thing. Perhaps he follows Peter van Inwagen in supposing that the only genuine material things are living. But in this case, it is odd that he mentioned in his example that “the remains” of the deceased rested peacefully. For if the remains rest peacefully for a while, then those remains must exist for a while. Eventually they will go out of existence. Why can’t we say that the thing that was the person goes out of existence when the remains go out of existence?

26. My view, therefore, is that David Mackie (an animalist of a different stripe) has a more plausible view on this question. See his (1999): 219–242.

27. “If [a person] ceased to be a person (i.e., ceased to have a first-person perspective), however, she would cease to exist altogether.” Baker (1999b): 2.

28. She would say that when the baby gains the first-person perspective, a new object comes into existence—this is the person. Thus, on her view (as I understand it) it’s not strictly correct to say that the person formerly was a baby.

29. In (1992) I suggested that there is a concept of personality for which this sort of claim might be true. I called it “the psychological concept of personality.” See pp. 103–104.

30. I wrote to Neil Busis, who is the director of a website called “Neuroguide: Neurosciences on the Internet.” He is a specialist in neurological disorders. I asked him whether there is any neurological disorder in which the victim loses the first-person perspective. My thought (perhaps overly influenced by too much Oliver Sachs) was that there must be some neurological basis for the possession of the first-person perspective. Surely, if there is such a basis, it could be lost through disease or injury. Then we would have a person without the first-person perspective. Busis wrote back and told me that some stroke victims suffer from something quite like the condition Baker describes as “loss of the first-person perspective.” He called it “anosognosia,” and he said that people suffering from it lose the ability to distinguish between themselves and other items in their environments. He described it as “confusion between figure and ground.” It is not clear to me that

anosognosia is as pervasive as loss of the first-person perspective. But the point is that it seems conceivable that a person could undergo some neurological damage that would bring about such a loss. The person would then be (as Baker sees it) psychologically more like an intelligent dog. In my view, such an unfortunate would be an unfortunate *person*. Baker (if I understand her correctly) would say that such a stroke would make the person go out of existence, though his body would still be there, walking and talking somewhat as before. See her (1998).

31. It might be interesting to compare the view of Hud Hudson in his (1999) to the view of this imaginary philosopher.

32. It might seem that the mere statement of the view is sufficient to refute it. The view has some strange implications. One is this: in the example cited, there are two items, B and P. They are atom-for-atom duplicates for ninety years. Each has the person-making property steadily throughout this period. Yet one of them—P—is a person, and the other—B—is not a person. This seems very strange. What strikes me as being even stranger is that what bars B from personality is that it existed at an earlier time when it was just a fetus and will exist at a later time when it will be a corpse. It seems odd that this highly personal object should be denied personality on the basis of these facts. As I see it, fetuses normally develop into adult persons; persons deteriorate into corpses. But the imagined view implies that these familiar facts have to undergo a certain amount of redescription.

33. Although his conceptual scheme is different, Hudson introduces some interesting concepts that have correspondents here. A “maximal person” would be a person that is not a proper temporal part of a person; a “temporary person” would be something that has a maximal person as a proper temporal part; a “person-part” would be a proper temporal part of some maximal person. (For the actual definitions, see Hudson (1999), p. 304.)

34. I am grateful to several friends for comments and encouragement. After seeing his students struggling with some passages in *Confrontations with the Reaper*, Owen McLeod suggested that I might do well to try to clarify my thoughts about the Termination Thesis. Ted Sider, Clay Splawn, and Kris McDaniel read earlier drafts of this paper and provided knowledgeable and insightful criticism and suggestions. Their generous help is especially appreciated, since, so far as I know, none of them is inclined to agree with my main points in this paper. Conversations with Lynne Rudder Baker and Richard Feldman have also been very helpful. I have benefitted from studying Carter (1999), Mackie (1999), and Olson (1997). Each of these works contains doctrines or arguments similar to ones I have presented here.

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