Relativism and Persistence

by Eric T. Olson

i.

Philosophers often talk as if what it takes for a person to persist through time were up to us, as individuals or as a linguistic community, to decide. In most ordinary situations it might be fully determinate whether someone has survived or perished: barring some unforeseen catastrophe, it is clear enough that you will still exist ten minutes from now, for example. But there is no shortage of actual and imaginary situations where it is not so clear whether one survives. Here reasonable people may disagree. There are "fission" cases where each of one's cerebral hemispheres is transplanted into a different head; Star-Trek-style "teletransportation" stories; actual cases of brain damage so severe that one can never again regain consciousness, even though one's circulation, breathing, digestion, and other "animal" functions continue; and stories where one's brain cells are gradually removed and replaced by cells from someone else, to name only a few favorites.

In many such cases we say, correctly, that the person in question has perished; that is the right answer to the question, Has she survived? But in some of those very situations, we are told that it might have been correct to give the opposite answer, and say that the person perished--even if nothing different happened to her. Some philosophers say that we are free to choose at random between saying that the person has survived and saying that she has ceased to exist; both are equally correct descriptions of the same event. Others say that a different answer to the question, Has the person survived? is in fact false, but would be true if we had a different concept of personal identity, or if our conventions for individuating people were different--in short, if we thought and spoke differently.

Parfit, for example, says that whether one has survived a certain adventure is often an "empty question". The claim that one has survived and the claim that one has ceased to exist and been replaced by someone else "do not describe different possibilities, any of which might be true, and one of which must be true," he writes. "These claims are merely different descriptions of the same outcome" (1984, p. 259). The apparently contradictory claims are both correct.

According to Unger, how much tinkering with my brain would kill me and how much of it

I could survive depends at least in part on "those conventions by means of which we individuate each one of us from the rest of the world" (1990, p. 239). He asks us to imagine a fine-grained spectrum of cases ranging from no change in my brain to the complete replacement of my brain with another. The line between the last cases along the spectrum in which I definitely survive and the first case where I do not definitely survive, Unger says, is determined by our "personal individuative conventions". As things are, it would not be correct to say that I survived a certain sort of brain surgery; but if our linguistic community had adopted different individuative conventions, it might have been correct to say that I survived that same surgical procedure.

Mackie writes that through "conceptual reform" we might "extend personal identity" to cover adventures that one could not now be said to survive, such as the "offprinting" (as he puts it) of the information stored in one's brain onto another brain (1976, p. 203).

And Nozick, describing his "closest-continuer" theory, writes,

> The content of the measure of closeness, and so the content of a person's identity through time, can vary (somewhat) from person to person. What is special about people, about selves, is that what constitutes their identity through time is partially determined by their own conception of themselves, a conception which may vary, perhaps appropriately does vary, from person to person. (1981, p. 69)

Aune (1985, ch. 5), Braude (1991, p. 204), Gert (1971), Hirsch (1982, ch. 10), Johnston (1989), and Morton (1990) say similar things. [1]

ii.

These claims are puzzling. One description of the case is true, we are told; but if, under the right circumstances, we had described the very same events in a different way, apparently inconsistent with the first, we should have said something equally true. But how could the way we think and talk make any difference to whether the person in the operating room survives or perishes? Obviously we cannot prolong her existence now by changing our concepts or conventions. Nor could we have done so by changing our concepts or conventions at some time in the past. Our way of thinking and speaking doesn't cause people undergoing certain kinds of surgery or other adventures to survive or not survive. Our words and thoughts don't

have magical powers. But then how could it have been true to say that someone has survived an adventure when it is in fact true to say that that same person has not survived that same adventure?

Imagine that Jane is an ordinary human being who undergoes an adventure that we--you and I and those who think and speak as we do--are inclined to say she doesn't survive. To pick a concrete example, let the adventure be "teletransportation": all of Jane's atoms are torn apart, and a bit later, by some wondrous but highly reliable process, new atoms are arranged somewhere else in just the way that Jane's atoms were lately arranged. (This is only an example: if you think that "teletransportation" is not a case where we are in some sense free to decide whether one survives, or if you think one could survive it, imagine another one.) This happens to Jane at t, and an hour later, at t*, we judge--correctly, as it is--that Jane has ceased to exist. But there are some circumstances in which it would have been correct to say that Jane survived that very same adventure, and still existed at t*. According to Parfit, perhaps, those circumstances might only have us choosing to describe what happened in a different way: "Jane survived." According to others, it would be correct to say that Jane survived if we thought or spoke differently. We can imagine a world where "teletransportation" is common, and is thought to be quite literally a way of traveling (the scare quotes come off), rather than as a way of dying and being replaced by a duplicate somewhere else. If we saw things that way, we should say, truly, that Jane did not perish at t, but survived until t* and beyond.

So whereas the sentence

1. Jane perished at t

is true as we utter it, if we had different concept of personal identity or different individuative conventions, or simply different interests or whims, we might describe the situation by saying

2. Jane did not perish at t.

And this too would be perfectly true.

How can this be? You might think that I have misunderstood the relativists' position. They didn't mean to say that 1. and its apparent negation, 2., are consistent, but only 1. and

3. If our ways of thinking and speaking had been different in the right way, it would have been true to say that Jane did not perish at t.

While this claim would still be mysterious enough, it might be coherent if the logic of counterfactuals were not what most philosophers take it to be. Perhaps the antecedent of 3. somehow picks out a possible world, or a set of worlds, in which Jane really does survive her adventure. It might be a world in which our ways of thinking and speaking really do have magical powers, or more generally a world where different causal influences act upon Jane.

But the relativists about personal identity are not merely proposing a deviant semantics for conditionals. Suppose two observers witness Jane's adventure: one of "us", who says correctly that Jane perished, and someone from a community that thinks and speaks in one of the ways that would make it correct for us to say that Jane survived if we thought and spoke in that way. Thus 1. is true when we utter it, and 2. is true when the other observer utters it at the same time to describe the same situation. The relativist is telling us that 1. and 2. (or the propositions they express when uttered in this situation) might both be true at once. This appears to be a straightforward contradiction, and a reductio ad absurdum of the relativist view.

To avoid this charge, the relativists must explain how 1. and 2. are consistent, even though one appears to be the straightforward denial of the other. They ought to be able to paraphrase the two sentences in a way that makes the apparent contradiction disappear. If 1. and 2. really do express consistent propositions when they are uttered in the situation we imagined, there ought to be a way of stating those propositions that is free from the appearance of paradox. Consistent propositions ought to be statable in a way that displays their consistency. Suppose you ask me whether a certain novel is a good book, and I reply, "Well, it is and it isn't." Have I contradicted myself? Perhaps I have; at any rate I have expressed myself in a paradoxical way, and if I am willing to stand by my claim, I owe you an explanation of what I said, or meant to say, that removes the appearance of contradiction. I say that the novel was good in some respects and not so good in others, which is obviously consistent. Those who insist that 1. and 2. are both true in the case we described owe us a similar explanation.

There are several promising strategies for doing this, and I shall turn to them presently. In the meantime I want to discuss two simpler ways in which one might try to defend the relativist position, and show why they are inadequate.

iii.

There is a trivial way in which 1. and 2. might be consistent. For all I know, the sentence 'Jane did not perish at t', though it is false in English when we utter it in our imaginary case, expresses a truth in some other language. In Tlingit it might mean that the sun is shining, and that is certainly consistent with the English sentence 'Jane perished at t'. And if we had thought and spoken differently in just the right way, we should have spoken Tlingit instead of English. So the relativist could remove the appearance of contradiction by paraphrasing (or rather translating) 2. as 'The sun is shining'.

But we don't want a case where one observer says that Jane perishes and another says that the sun is shining. We want a case where both observers are talking about Jane and whether she survives, and describe the case in apparently contradictory but in fact equally true ways. And we want the apparent contradiction to be resolved by virtue of the fact that the two observers have different concepts of personal identity, or different individuative conventions, or because there is something wrong with the question whether Jane survived her adventure or not. So although we might allow that the speaker of 1. and the speaker of 2. speak different dialects of English, we can't have them talking about completely different things. That would make the relativist position completely uninteresting.

We might try to solve the mystery by appealing to vagueness. Suppose the facts don't determine whether Jane survives her adventure. There is a fact of the matter in the "easy" cases; it is a definite fact that Jane survived up until the time when she stepped into the transporter room, for example. But in the indeterminate cases, of which this is one, the facts leave the question of Jane's survival open, and we can say what we please. We can say that Jane perished, or we can say that Jane survived--as long as we don't try to say both at once.

This is not what the relativists have in mind. If it is vague or indeterminate whether Jane survives, then it is neither definitely true that she survives nor definitely not true; and it is neither definitely true nor definitely not true that she perishes. Both observers--the one who utters 1. and the one who utters 2.--are only half right: their statements have a truth value intermediate between truth and falsity (or perhaps no truth value at all). There is just one description of the case that is definitely true, namely that Jane "sort of" survives and "sort of" doesn't. It is definitely true that Jane neither definitely survives nor definitely perishes. We can compare Jane's situation with that of her friend Mary, who is a borderline case of a tall person. I say she's tall, and you say she isn't. We are both equally right, and equally wrong. The truth

of the matter is that Mary is "sort of" tall and "sort of" not tall, neither definitely tall nor definitely not tall, on the boundary between tallness and nontallness.

Some philosophers claim that the notion of vague identity is incoherent. If that is not so, this proposal would resolve the apparent contradiction between 1. and 2. We could say that Jane survives and that she doesn't survive without contradicting ourselves, just as we can say that Mary is tall and that she's not tall. But this proposal has nothing to do with relativism. The business about different concepts of personal identity or different individuative conventions that is supposed to distinguish the two observers and account for the apparant conflict now drops out entirely, for anyone can describe the situation in both ways. And both 1. and 2. are just as much incorrect descriptions of the case as they are correct ones.

You might think it unfair of me to saddle the relativist who would appeal to vagueness with vague identity. Perhaps there is only linguistic vagueness at work here, vagueness de dicto and not de re. The fuzziness is not in what happens "out there". It resides only in our language. The rules for using certain English words are not precise enough to determine which description of the case--'Jane survived' or 'Jane did not survive'--is correct, and that is why neither description is definitely true or definitely false.

While this suggestion might be made to work, it requires more than just vagueness to resolve the relativistic paradox. If the vagueness is in our language, one or more of the expressions in the sentence 'Jane perished at t' must be vague. Which one? We can assume for the sake of argument that 'at t' is not vague. Could the name 'Jane' be vague? Might our conventions of reference be insufficient to determine just which being that name picks out? Only if a great many rational beings stepped into the transporter room and not just one, as we assumed. I discuss this option in section vii below. If the vagueness is built into the concept of identity itself ('perishes', 'survives', etc.), it seems that we have de re vagueness again (but see section vi).

The word 'person' is certainly vague, at least if 'person' means something like 'conscious, rational moral agent'. You can find borderline cases of personhood in any state hospital. Could that explain why 'Jane perished at t' is vague? The trouble is that there do not appear to be any borderline cases of personhood in our story. Jane is clearly a person, and so is the being who steps out of the "transporter" at the other end. The hard question is whether these are two beings or one, not whether anything is a person or not a person.

For the vagueness of 'person' to be relevant here, there must be several "candidates" for

personhood involved. Perhaps there is one humanoid being that survives the adventure, and another being that does not survive it. Our concept of personhood, furthermore, has certain persistence conditions built into it. But those conditions aren't completely precise, and give no clear verdict in cases of teletransportation; so it is not clear whether the thing that survived counts as a person or not. In that case one observer, whose concept of personhood is more precise than ours, might say that the thing that survived is a person while the thing that perished is not; and she will use the name 'Jane' to refer to the one that survived. Another observer, whose concept of personhood is "sharpened" in a different way, might say that the thing that perished is a person and the thing that survived is not. She will use the name 'Jane' to refer to the one who perished. And of course it is up to us which concept of personhood to accept; so the relativists will be happy. However, this solution works only if there are in fact two humanoid beings who step into the transporter room, and the name 'Jane' is ambiguous between them. It requires the two observers to be talking about different beings. This requires a rather capacious ontology of material objects. Again, I shall discuss this option in greater detail later (section vii).

iv.

Two more brief preliminaries.

I hope it is clear that the relativist position has nothing to do with "teletransportation" per se. We need only a case where Jane exists without a doubt at t, and then undergoes some adventure that leaves room for doubt about whether she still exists at t*. There are plenty of other cases. Perhaps Jane's cerebrum was cut out of her head shortly after t, and each half was implanted into a new head, so that at t* there are apparently two people who claim to be Jane and to remember Jane's past up until t. Perhaps small bits of Jane's brain are gradually replaced with new bits starting at t, so that by t* it is no longer clear whether we still have Jane or whether we have someone else instead. Or perhaps Jane is slowly dying of cancer, and while she is definitely still alive at t, by t* it is no longer clear whether she is still with us.

Second, while the relativist position is most often applied to cases of personal identity, there is no reason why it should not apply to the persistence through time of anything whatever. If it is sometimes up to us whether a person survives or doesn't survive a certain adventure, presumably the same is true for dogs, trees, mountains, and many other material objects. In fact relativism about the persistence of such things, and especially artifacts, is even more popular

than relativism about our own persistence. [2] However, everything that I have to say about personal identity applies to the identity of other objects as well.

v.

The first proposal for showing that our utterance of 1. and another observer's utterance of 2. to describe the same situation might both be true involves saying that there aren't really any people. Strictly speaking, there is no one named 'Jane', and there are no such beings as you and I. Perhaps we use the word 'person' and the personal pronouns and proper names merely as a loose way of talking about the behavior of certain tiny particles that are arranged in a special, "anthropomorphic" way. But those particles don't compose anything. That is, there is no larger material object that has these particles--the ones that most philosophers say compose me--as parts, and every part of which overlaps with one or more of these particles. The largest material object here, at my desk, is microscopic and weighs only a tiny fraction of a gram. Alternatively, perhaps there are thinking beings, but they don't really persist through time, or at any rate not for more than a few seconds or minutes--not long enough to survive one of the problematic adventures that figure in discussions of personal identity.

If there are no people, or if people don't persist through time, there are no philosophical puzzles about personal identity through time. What appear to be disagreements about whether someone has survived or perished are in reality disagreements about something else--factual disagreements about the behavior or particles, for example. Or they are not disagreements at all, but simply the result of different ways of using the language of personal pronouns and proper names to speak loosely about particles or the like: purely verbal disputes.

Consider an analogy. Perhaps there aren't really any armies, but only individual soldiers and pieces of equipment. This is plausible: when a journalist says that there are two large armies moving towards Kamchatka, she doesn't seem to be saying or implying that there are two huge, scattered material objects, each made up of thousands of men and women, each having a mass that is the sum of the masses of all of its parts. We say that there is an army whenever there are vast numbers of individual soldiers and pieces of equipment united under one command, whether or not there is any larger physical object (or object of any other sort) of which those individuals are parts.

If this is the right way to think about armies, we can see how general questions about what it takes for an army to persist through time might not be entirely serious ones. Suppose that

over the course of a year all of the soldiers of a particular army are replaced with new men and women. Do we now have the same army with different members, or has the old army been replaced with a numerically different one? Since there is no object called an army that might survive or perish, and talk of armies is just a convenient but loose way of talking about individual soldiers, we can say what we please, as long as we agree about what we mean. We might agree to say (speaking loosely, of course) that an army persists just in case its command structure is preserved (no doubt military officers and lawyers could tell us just what that means). Or we might agree to call armies the same army just in case they comprise most of the same soldiers. Either convention would be equally correct as long as it were generally accepted. Since there are no armies, there is nothing to be wrong about, unless we are wrong about the behavior or persistence of individual soldiers.

We can imagine two communities of English speakers that have different "conventions of army identity", perhaps anchored in military law. There might be a situation in which Canadian law, and all Canadians, would say that an army had been disbanded and a new army formed, but where American law, and all Americans, would say that a single army had survived in an altered form. Though apparently contradictory, both descriptions would be correct. Moreover it would have been correct for the Americans to say that the army had ceased to exist rather than to say that it survived if they had thought and spoken as the Canadians do. We can show this by paraphrasing the two descriptions in a more perspicuous way. "This is the same army that was here a year ago," spoken by an American, becomes:

> There are human beings (etc.) under army command here now, and they are under the same command as the human beings who were arranged in that way here a year ago.

"This is not the same army as the one that was here a year ago," spoken by Canadians, is paraphrased as:

> There are human beings (etc.) under army command here now, and there were human beings under army command here a year ago, most of whom are no longer under army command here and now.

Doubtless these paraphrases could be improved. They are obscure, and probably also fail to

capture adequately the content of the propositions the two observers expressed. They are meant to give only a rough idea of what a proper analysis would look like. [3] But they are clearly consistent, and they remove the appearance of conflict and paradox from the original descriptions.

Can we do the same for statements about personal identity? Perhaps the sentence 'Jane perished at t', as we utter it to describe what happens in the teletransportation case, expresses something like the following proposition:

> there are particles arranged anthropomorphically at times up until t, and those particles are associated with thoughts that stand in relation R to one another; and no particles arranged anthropomorphically after t are associated with thoughts that are then R-related to the first,

where relation R on mental states incorporates our criterion of personal identity. When the other observer says, "Jane did not perish at t," to describe the same events, we paraphrase her claim as

> both before and after t there are particles arranged anthropomorphically, and those particles are associated with thoughts, both before and after t, that stand in relation R*.

What makes the second observer's way of thinking and speaking about personal identity different from ours is that R and R* are different relations. If so, it might be possible for mental states that stand to one another in R* not to stand to one another in R, in which case the two claims are consistent. [4]

If the relativist can remove the apparent conflict between sentences like 1. and 2. by showing how they aren't really about people (there being no people for them to be about), in something like the way I have suggested, we can concede that her view is coherent. She will have shown that the apparent contradiction was only apparent.

But the "eliminativist" has her work cut out for her. It may be no more than a philosophical warm-up exercise to defend the position that there are no armies. It is far more difficult to deny one's own existence. What is needed is not simply the view that no conscious, thinking being deserves to be called a "person". Someone might claim that you and I are not people, but simply bodies, or animals, perhaps because our persistence conditions are wrong, or because

we lack free will, or what have you. But if there are such beings as you and I--whether we are people or not--there is such a being as Jane, and the relativist seems to be telling us that she, or "it", both survives her adventure and doesn't survive it. The current proposal is that Jane does not exist, not simply that she is not a person.

To maintain consistently that there are no people--no such beings as you and I--one must be able to show, at least in principle, how all sentences that appear to be about people could be true even if there are not, strictly speaking, any conscious, thinking beings. She must account for the fact that statements like, "Reagan was president for eight years," are true (or at least appropriate in some sense), while statements like, "Reagan is made of silly putty," are not. That is, she must be able to paraphrase all statements ostensibly about people into sentences that are equivalent in some sense to those, but which do not appear to entail that there are people. Though Spinoza, Hume, and Russell all denied the existence of people, none of them gave an account of the content of ordinary statements about people that showed how they were different from statements about unicorns.

It might appear easy to paraphrase a sentence like 'there is someone in the next room' as 'there are particles arranged anthropomorphically in the next room'. Physiologists and biochemists could tell us a great deal about what it is for particles to be arranged in that way. But my suggestion about anthropomorphically-arranged particles being "associated with" certain thoughts was whistling in the dark. I do not know how there could be thoughts without a thinker, and I have only the vaguest idea of how to connect such thoughts with the appropriate particles. (Try paraphrasing 'some people think they're better than others' in a way that doesn't appear to quantify over thinking beings.)

Perhaps this problem could be solved: perhaps someone can show us how one can coherently deny one's own existence, or that any thinking being persists through time. Even so, I think it is safe to assume that most relativists about personal identity will not find this proposal very attractive. Let us consider some other ways of making sense of the relativists' claims.

vi.

Perhaps 'Jane perished at t' as spoken by one observer and 'Jane did not perish at t' as spoken by another observer can both be true because those observers have different standards for applying the predicate 'perished at t'. We might compare different standards for survival

with different standards for tallness. Mary is five feet, nine inches tall. She would be considered tall in Rongovia, but not in Sylvania. A Rongovian (speaking English) would say, "Mary is tall", while a Sylvanian would say, "Mary is not tall". Who is right? They both are: the Rongovian and the Sylvanians simply have different but equally correct standards of tallness. We could remove the appearance of paradox by saying that Mary is tall by Rongovian standards (tall for a Rongovian, say), but not tall by Sylvanian standards.

These different criteria need not be simply a matter of degree along a single dimension. There are many different and incommensurable factors that might figure in judgments about persistence--material continuity, causal connections, similarity, psychological continuity, and more--and the Rongovians and Sylvanians might weigh these factors differently. Survival might be more like being a sport than like being tall. Perhaps competitive chess is a borderline case of a sport; but if so, it is not a borderline case in the way that Mary is a borderline case of being tall. There are many different criteria for being a sport, and chess definitely satisfies some of those criteria but definitely does not satisfy others.

Might the Rongovian and the Sylvanians also have different standards for personal identity? Suppose that the Rongovians think Jane survives "teletransportation" and the Sylvanians think she doesn't survive it. Who is right? Perhaps they both are: Jane has survived by Rongovian standards but not by Sylvanian ones. 'Survives' would be open to different interpretations in just the way that 'tall' or 'sport' is. On this proposal, whether Jane survives her adventure would be up to us in the following way. Although we, as a linguistic community, have in fact adopted the Sylvanian standards for survival (say), making it correct for us to say that Jane perished and false to say that she survived, we might have accepted the Rongovian standards instead, in which case it would have been correct to say that Jane survived and false to say that she perished. (Alternatively, our standards might be vague, and not determine whether Jane survived or not; but we could have made them more precise and settled the matter, by adopting the Rongovian standards or the Sylvanian ones.) That might not be much consolation to Jane, of course. Nothing would be different for her. The difference is only in the way we describe what happens to her. So we can paraphrase 1. as

Jane does not survive by Sylvanian standards,

while 2. becomes,

Jane survives by Rongovian standards.

When we spell out just what those standards are, it should become clear whether the paraphrases are consistent.

So far, so good. But survival and identity are importantly different from properties like tallness. Suppose we call the person who results from Jane's adventure 'Martha'. The Rongovians say that Jane is Martha, and the Sylvanians say that Jane is not Martha. Could it be that Jane and Martha are one by Rongovian standards and two by Sylvanian standards? Only, it seems, if the Sylvanians and the Rongovians use the expressions 'are one' and 'are two' in importantly different ways. This is not surprising. Survival implies identity, and identity is inseparable from cardinality: to say that Jane survived her adventure is to say that someone who exists afterwards is such that she and Jane are one.

We could put the difficulty this way. Consider Jane, that being who steps into the transporter at t and disappears. What really happens to that being? Does she still exist after the adventure or not? Suppose Martha, the person who materializes at the "receiving" end of the machine, is asleep at a later time, t*. According to the Sylvanians, Jane is not asleep at t*; according to the Rongovians, she is. Remember, we are supposing that the Sylvanians and the Rongovians use the name 'Jane' to refer to the same being. Unless we want to say that the Rongovians and the Sylvanians mean different things by the predicate 'is asleep at t*', it would seem that they could not both be right. Either Jane is still with us or she isn't. If she is, the Sylvanians are mistaken; if she isn't, the Rongovians are mistaken. (It may be indeterminate whether Jane still exists; but in that case both parties are only partly right, and partly wrong.)

We can say that both descriptions of the case are correct (Jane survives by Rongovian standards but perishes by Sylvanian standards) only if there is no such thing as surviving or ceasing to exist simpliciter--that is, only if there is no such relation as "absolute" numerical identity. If there were such a relation, then either Jane would be identical with Martha simpliciter, or Jane and Martha would be numerically different (or it would be indeterminate); and in that case the Rongovians, who say that Jane is asleep at t*, and the Sylvanians, who say that Jane is not asleep at t*, could not both be (definitely) right. Instead, Jane survives qua Rongovian-person but perishes qua Sylvanian-person; Jane and Martha are the same Rongovian-person but different Sylvanian-people. And that is all there is to be said. Asking

whether Jane and Martha are one being or two, without qualification, is like asking whether Missouri is to the left of Illinois without qualification. Missouri is to the left of Illinois from some vantage points but not from others; but there is no such relation as being to the left of simpliciter. For the current proposal to be coherent, the same must go for numerical identity. [5]

If identity is relative to kinds (whether they be different kinds of people or kinds like person and mass of matter), reference too will have to be relative to kinds in an anlogous way. Ordinarily, singular reference is taken to involve absolute identity: the name 'Jane' denotes a certain being and nothing else. That is, it denotes all and only those things that are numerically identical with a particular person. But on the present proposal, the Sylvanians and the Rongovians use the name 'Jane' differently. The Sylvanians use it to pick out all and only those things that are the same Sylvanian-person as the one baptised 'Jane'; the Rongovians use it to pick out all and only those beings that are the same Rongovian-person as the one baptised 'Jane'. And some people, such as the one who steps out of the transporter room and gets baptised 'Martha', are the same Rongovian-person as Jane but not the same Sylvanian-person. That is why the Sylvanians and the Rongovians mean different things when they say, "Martha is asleep at t*." Since there is no such thing as identity simpliciter, we cannot ask whether they pick out the same being or different ones with the name 'Martha'. All we can say is that they pick out different Sylvanian-people but the same Rongovian-person, and that their linguistic conventions indicate which relative-identity relation--sameness of Sylvanian person or sameness of Rongovian person--governs the reference of the name. [6]

This is the metaphysical picture that seems most closely to reflect the view that there are different but equally correct concepts or criteria of personal identity. But again, few if any of those who appear to be relativists about personal identity accept the relative-identity thesis.

vii.

If we must have ambiguity of reference, there is a more attractive, or at any rate a more popular, metaphysic that the relativist could turn to. Singular reference may be ambiguous in a more straightforward way. We say, "Jane perished at t." Some observers from a different community say, "Jane did not perish at t, but survived until t*." We are right because the person denoted by our name 'Jane' ceased to exist at t. They are right because the person picked out by their name 'Jane' survived until the later time t*. Since a thing cannot outlive itself, "our

Jane" and "their Jane" must be different beings. What we believe is this:

$Jane_1$ ceased to exist at t.

They accept this:

$Jane_2$ did not cease to exist at t.

There is no disagreement because we and they are talking about different people, $Jane_1$ and $Jane_2$. This might be the most natural way of resolving the relativistic paradox. If one person says 'Jane survived' and someone else says 'Jane didn't survive' and both are supposed to be right, the charitable interpretation that springs most readily to mind is that there are two "Janes" and each speaker is talking about a different one. [7]

We and they will also appear to disagree about what it takes, in general, for someone to persist through time, as well as about whether some particular person has survived some particular adventure. We say that no one can survive "teletransportation," for example, and they say otherwise. If this were real and not merely apparent disagreement, either we or they would be mistaken, contrary to the relativist position. But here too we can explain away the appearance of disagreement by appealing to ambiguity of reference. There are beings of whom our criterion is true, beings who cannot survive "teletransportation" (or any of the other adventures our criterion of identity says one couldn't survive). There are also beings of whom their criterion is true, beings who can and perhaps sometimes do survive teletransportation. We use our personal pronouns, proper names (like 'Jane'), and related expressions to talk about beings of the first kind, and we ignore beings of the second kind. They talk instead about beings of the second kind, and ignore the ones we talk about. We and they are simply talking about different people. What it takes for us to persist through time is up to us insofar as it is up to us, as a linguistic community, which beings we pick out with our personal referring expressions. By adopting a different concept or criterion of personal identity we cannot change the sorts of adventures that we could survive. But we can change which beings we are, as it were. That is, we can stop using our personal pronouns (such as 'I') to pick out beings who cannot survive a given adventure, and use them instead to pick out beings who can survive it. Our criterion of personal identity boils down to a convention of reference.

On this view there are really at least two people--two rational, conscious moral agents--whenever we thought there was just one. There is a being who cannot survive "teletransportation", and of whom our criterion of identity and our judgments about persistence and nonpersistence are true. But because our second observer accepts a different criterion of identity, which we are supposing to be true as well, there is a second rational being there who can survive that adventure. Even if this second observer had not been present, there would have been a being there who satisfied his criterion of identity. He didn't bring it about that something satisfied his criterion of identity, or survived the adventure, merely by being present or by thinking and speaking as he did. So for any criterion of identity that we or anyone else might have accepted, unless that criterion is false, there must be people--rational, conscious beings--of whom that criterion is true.

Imagine that Jane has had a head injury and that parts of her brain shut down one by one as she slowly dies. We say, correctly, that she perishes at t, whereas our visitor (who accepts a different criterion of personal identity that we might have accepted) maintains that Jane hung on for another hour, until t*. If we are right, someone perished at t; if the other observer is right, someone else survived until t*. But there is an infinite amount of room for apparent disagreement here. A third observer might come from a community that would judge Jane to have perished midway between t and t*; so unless that observer is mistaken, there is someone, whom she refers to as 'Jane', who perishes then. And so on. For every correct criterion of personal identity, there will be someone here, someone denoted by 'Jane' in the corresponding dialect of English (or whatever language), of whom that criterion is true. There are in fact far, far more people than we thought.

No one is ever really alone. There are vast numbers of people just like me except that they perhaps began to exist or will cease to exist before or after I do, and that their criterion of identity is different from mine. (They can survive a little bit more brain damage than I could, or a little bit less, for example; or perhaps completely different factors are relevant to their persistence.) They all live inside my skin, sleep in my bed, write my papers. We may not talk this way. Anyone who holds this view will say that we "count people as one" when they share most or all of their parts, rather than when "they" are numerically identical. [8] Since all of the people sitting in my chair right now overlap, we count them as one, and say correctly, though loosely, that I am alone. If that is right, people engaged in the ordinary business of life are not mistaken whenever they say something like, "One person was killed in the explosion," or,

"Only eight people came to the party." So one can argue that this proposal does not contradict anything that we all believe. Nevertheless many philosophers, and I expect many relativists, will be unhappy with these ontological commitments. But there are other troubles.

There would seem to be no way for me to know which of the many people who share my bed and wear my shoes I am. I believe that I am the one (if there is only one) who has "our" criterion of identity through time, whatever exactly that may be. (Most relativists assume that there is some criterion of personal identity that most if not all of "us" accept.) And that may be true: our conventions of reference might guarantee that my 'I' picks out that person and no other. But the others--my "rivals"--think the same way as I do. (Their thoughts could hardly be different from mine, since they are my thoughts.) Presumably they each believe that they, too, have "our" criterion of identity. [9] They believe that they can survive just the kinds of adventures that I can survive. But they are mistaken. Their criterion of identity is different from mine. How do I know that I'm not one of them, and have a different criterion of identity from the one I think I have? No possible evidence could help me find out. [10]

So this proposal comes with a vexing epistemological problem, as well as ontological commitments and complex new semantics for English.

You might try to avoid the epistemological problem by suggesting that when I say 'I', I don't refer only to myself; rather I refer ambiguously to myself and to all of my "rivals". Each one of us refers ambiguously to all of us when he says 'I'. But it is hard to see how this could be compatible with relativism. If the word 'I' when I utter it refers to a lot of beings, then statements like 'I'm hungry' could be definitely true only if all or at least most of the beings picked out in that way are hungry. At any rate that is the usual way of dealing with ambiguity of reference. But then it could not be true that I have "our" criterion of identity, for most of the referents of my 'I' have a different criterion. When I say, "I could not survive teletransportation" (or the like), I could be at best half right and half wrong, for presumably about half of the people who now share their space and their matter with me have persistence conditions that enable them to survive teletransportation.

viii

I have discussed three strategies for removing the appearance of contradiction from the relativist position: eliminativism about people, relative identity, and a capacious ontology of rational beings with ambiguity of reference. No doubt there are other ways of making the

relativist position coherent. But we must keep in mind that any purported solution must provide us with a way of paraphrasing the seemingly contradictory claims that relativism entails (such as 'Jane survived' and 'Jane did not survive') into a form that displays their consistency. And any such proposal is likely to have surprising metaphysical consequences of its own. [11]

Notes

1. Relativists about when someone perishes might also be relativists about when someone begins to exist; so it is not surprising that some participants in the abortion debate advocate the latter view (e.g. Austin 1989, p. 31).

2. E.g. Hospers (1967, pp. 38f.) and Wiggins (1976), p. 163. Even Nozick, who says that we each have a special power over the conditions of our own persistence, writes, in a discussion of the Ship of Theseus,

> For complicated cases, we may feel that which is closest [i.e. the closest continuer of the original ship] is a matter to decide, that we must sharpen our concept to settle which is (identical with) the original entity. It is different, though, with persons, and especially with ourselves; we are not willing to think that whether something is <u>us</u> can be a matter of (somewhat arbitrary) decision or stipulation. (1981, p. 34)

3. Chisholm offers sophisticated paraphrases of statements ostensibly about the persistence of tables that is consistent with his view that tables do not persist through time (1976, 97-108). For another related account see van Inwagen (1990), section 14.

4. Parfit sometimes writes as if this were his view. At one point he describes his position like this:

> In a sense, a Bundle Theorist denies the existence of persons. An outright denial is of course absurd. As Reid protested in the eighteenth century, "I am not thought, I am not action. I am not feeling; I am something which thinks and acts and feels." I am not a series of events, but a person. A Bundle Theorist admits this fact, but claims it to be only a fact about our grammar, or our language. There are persons or subjects in this language-dependent way. If, however, persons are believed to be more than this...the Bundle Theorist denies that there are such things. (1987, p. 20; see also 1984, p. 341)

This sounds like the view that there are, strictly speaking, no people, but that the claims expressed in the ordinary business of life by such sentences as 'There are two people in the next room' are nevertheless often true, by virtue of facts about mental events. Sidelle (1989) describes his relativistic position in a similar way. "Metaphysically speaking," he says, when we pick out an object,

> what we are pointing at is in the first instance a lump or bunch of stuff, with no "built-in" identity conditions or modal features, so that we cannot even clearly speak of some thing to which we are pointing (p. 54n.).

5. Geach (e.g. 1967) and his followers say that someone who exists now and someone who exists at some future time might be the same person but not the same human organism, or the same body, or the same mass of matter, and that there is no such relation as absolute, unqualified numerical identity. As far as I know, Geach is not a relativist about personal identity; but the current proposal might seem like a natural extension of his view.

6. Much more will have to be said about relativized singular reference. For a fuller account of it see van Inwagen 1988.

7. Johnston (1989) explicitly endorses this view, and Hirsch suggests that it might be his as well (1982, p. 179). For reasons that I cannot go into here (see Burke 1992 and Olson, forthcoming), this position seems to be coherent only when conjoined with an ontology of temporal parts, with a counterpart-theoretical analysis of modal and dispositional properties (Lewis 1971).

8. See Lewis, 1976.

9. If the people who share my vocal apparatus always refer to only one person (me) when they say 'I', it may be that they are incapable of having any thoughts at all about themselves, and thus incapable of falsely believing themselves to have my criterion of identity. The belief that they would express by saying, "I could not (or shall not) survive teletransportation," might in fact be the belief that I, not they, could not survive teletransportation; and that, we are supposing, is true. But the epistemological problem remains, for if one might fail to refer to oneself by saying 'I', there would be no way of knowing whether one was that lucky person out of the many who does refer to himself.

10. Chihara (1994) discusses a similar epistemological problem, or pseudo-problem.

11. For comments on an earlier draft I am grateful to Michael Lynch.

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