

IDENTITY WITHOUT SURVIVAL: AN ACCOUNT ON TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

di Danny Marrero

Abstract

Parfit claims that «[c]ertain important questions do presuppose a question about personal identity. But they can be freed of this presupposition. And when they are, the question about identity has no importance». In this paper, I undertake to show that transformative experiences are not fully understood with the concept of identity. There are some notable differences between Parfit's account and mine. He studies cases of survival without identity, I study cases of identity without survival. His methodology is projection, while I do regressions. Radical changes in life come after a breaking experience. We see toward our past, compare our present self with our past self, and identify strong qualitative differences between them. Finally, while Parfit analyzes different imaginary cases, I use real cases such as moments of religious, or ideological conversion where the whole scheme of personal values is transformed. Someone going through these experiences could conceive of himself as a different person before and after the breaking point. These situations are experienced by the same person, but it seems that in these cases there are two different selves. If this is right, these cases can be described as situations of identity without survival. They are not cases of death, literally speaking. However, people experience their past selves as if they were dead. Defending this thesis, I am going to provide a concept of both identity and survival. In addition, I show that transformative experiences fulfilled what is required for identity, but not what is required for survival.

Keywords: Parfit, Survival, Identity, Transformative Experiences

1. *The Problem*

Derek Parfit suggests that «what matters in the continued existence of a person are, for the most part, relations of degree»¹. I agree. However, I want to explore cases of radical transformations in the continued existence of a person. My goal is not to criticize Parfit's ideas. Rather, I will apply his way of talking about the nature of personal identity to cases unexplored by his account. Specifically, he claims that «[c]ertain important questions do presuppose a question about personal identity. But they can be freed of this presupposition. And when they are, the question about identity has no importance»². The questions Parfit has in mind have to do with survival, psychological continuity and responsibility. I believe, inspired by Parfit, that questions about radical changes in life, or transformative experiences, are not fully understood with the concept of numerical identity. I expect to provide better criteria for the grasping of such cases.

There are some relevant differences between Parfit's account and mine. Broadly speaking, he studies cases of survival without identity, but I will study cases of identity without survival.³ His methodology calls for projections. In his words, «When we imagine ourselves in a problem case, we do feel that the question, “Would it be me?” must have an answer».⁴ I, differently, will do regressions. The idea is that radical changes in life, as I will explain later, come after a breaking experience. Usually we see toward our past and compare our present-self, “so to speak,” with our past-self. Identifying strong qualitative differences between these two selves, we realize radical transformations in our lives.⁵ The last point of de-

¹ D. PARFIT, *Personal Identity*, in «The Philosophical Review», LXXX, 1 (1971), p. 26.

² Ivi, p. 4.

³ I owe this expression to Eric Funkhouser.

⁴ D. PARFIT, *Personal Identity*, cit. p. 4.

⁵ This also differentiates my approach of transformative experiences from others who are well-known such as L.A. Paul's. Her method also calls for projections because her main concern is the problems associated with the

parture is that while Parfit, isolating our intuitions about personal identity, analyzes different imaginary cases, I use cases closer to real experiences by real people. Let me start with this last differentiation.

Below, I will numerate the list of creative cases studied by Parfit facilitating future references:

Case 1: «The man who, like an amoeba, divides»⁶.

Case 2: The assumption that «my brain is transplanted into someone else's (brainless) body»⁷.

Case 3: The surgery in which «[my] brain is divided, and each half is housed in a new body. Both resulting people have my character and apparent memories of my life»⁸.

Case 4: «[T]he cutting of the bridge between the hemispheres of the brain [resulting in] the creation of 'two separate spheres of consciousness,' each of which controls one half of the patient's body. What is experienced in each is, presumably, experienced by the patient»⁹.

Case 5: A variation of the previous example where «the bridge between my hemispheres is brought under my voluntary control. [...] By doing this, I would divide my mind. And we can suppose that when my mind is divided I can, in each half, bring about reunion»¹⁰.

Case 6: «[A] case in which one man is psychologically continuous with the dead Guy Fawkes»¹¹.

Case 7: «[Another] case in which two men are [Guy Fawkes]»¹².

process of deciding whether to go through a transformative experience or not (pp. 30-51).

⁶ D. PARFIT, *Personal Identity*, cit. p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 5.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 13.

¹² *Ibid.*

Case 8: A case of physical fusion where «two people come together. While they are unconscious, their two bodies grow into one. One person then wakes up»¹³.

Case 9: Two cases of psychological identity: One where the fused minds are «compatible. These can coexist in the one resulting person». The other where the minds are «incompatible. These, if of equal strength, can cancel out, and if of different strengths, the stronger can be made weaker»¹⁴.

Case 10: «[C]ertain imaginary beings [...] just like ourselves except that they reproduce by a process of natural division»¹⁵.

Case 11: Another imaginary being: «These reproduce by fusion as well as by division. And let us suppose that they fuse every autumn and divide every spring»¹⁶.

Case 12: «[A] third kind of being: In this world, there is neither division nor union. There are a number of everlasting bodies, which gradually change in appearance. And direct psychological relations, as before, hold only over limited periods of time»¹⁷.

For Parfit, the philosophical value of imaginary cases such as these is that they stimulate strong beliefs about ourselves such as «what we believe to be involved in our continued existence, » or «our beliefs about the nature of personal identity over time».¹⁸ I agree, but I also believe that real-live cases also are philosophical stimulating. Some of the cases I have in mind are moments of religious, or ideological conversion where the whole scheme of personal values is transformed. Another illustration is transitions through stages of life (e.g., from childhood to adolescence, from our labor life to our retirement years, or becoming a parent) where our worldview intensely transforms, whether we like it or not, whether conscious or subconscious. A third instance is extreme

¹³ Ivi, p. 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 19.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 22.

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 23.

¹⁸ D. PARFIT, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984 p. 200.

experiences from which we survive against any reasonable prediction (i.e., dangerous surgeries, deadly accidents, or mortal exposure to weapons or explosives), and that makes us reinvent our future with new resolutions. Last, but not least, another example is unfortunate moments (e.g., accidents or illnesses) after which we lose our cognitive or physical capacities and our lives irremediably change. Someone going through these experiences could conceive of him/herself as a different person before and after the respective breaking point. How can we take into account this intuition? The criterion of numerical identity is insufficient. It is clear that these situations are experienced by the same person, but it seems that in these cases, there are two different selves. If this is right, these cases can be described as situations of identity without survival. To clarify, they are not cases of death, literally speaking. Nevertheless, people experience their past selves as if they were dead. Defending this thesis, I will provide a concept of both identity and survival. In addition, I will show that these cases fulfilled what is required for identity, but not what is required for survival. I will use Parfit's account for the required conceptualization. Before, let me focus on one specific case, namely, the life of one of the most influential early Christians, Paul, the apostle (PA).

Following the tradition, we can divide PA's life into two significant periods. During the first part of his life, PA was recognized as Saul of Tarsus (ST). He, as a loyal Roman citizen, had devoted his life to the persecution of Jesus' disciples. But this devotion was radically transformed in one of his persecution expeditions. In traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus, ST claimed to see the resurrected Jesus surrounded by an incandescent light. The three days that follow this experience, ST remained blind. According to the biblical narrative, he was freed from this impairment by one of his former victims, the Christian, Ananias of Damascus. After that day, ST was recognized as PA, when he started preaching about Jesus's resurrection to the, so called, gentiles. Coming back to my main concern, my hypothesis is that ST did not survive as PA after seeing the resurrected Christ. Nonetheless, ST is identical to PA. My hypothesis has two parts, namely,

Survival Clause: ST did not survive as PA.

Identity Clause: ST is identical to PA.

Below, I will justify these claims.

2. *The Survival Clause*

Did ST survive as PA? My intuition is that he did not. Justifying my statement, I need to differentiate between identity and survival. Parfit provides a useful contrast for these concepts. Before unpacking it, let's take a closer look at ST's transformative experience. In the relevant literature, a transformative experience is «a new and different kind of experience» including epistemic and personal transformations.¹⁹ Firstly, they are epistemically transformative because the experiencer only knows what it is like to be in the experience when he/she goes through it.²⁰ Secondly, they are personally transformative, because «they *can* change who you are, in the sense of radically changing your point of view (rather than only slightly modifying your preferences)».²¹ More examples of transformative experiences are «experiencing a horrific physical attack, gaining a new sensory ability, [...] undergoing major surgery, winning an Olympic medal, participating in a revolution, [...] making a major scientific discovery».²²

As I take it, ST went through a transformative experience. This is one of the narratives taking into account such a moment²³:

¹⁹ L.A. PAUL, *Transformative Experience*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 17.

²⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 10-15.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 16.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ One can differentiate two groups of narratives accounting for ST's transformation. On one hand, one identifies a first-person perspective of ST's religious conversion in some of the letters he wrote (cf. Gal. 1: 13-23; Phil. 3: 4-14; 1 Tim. 1: 12-16). On the other hand, there are three third-person perspective narratives in the Biblical book of Acts (cf. 9: 1-30; 22: 1-16; 26: 4-18). I will assume, with some biblical scholars, that those groups of narratives are complementary (cf. T. SCHREINER, *Paul. Apostol of God's Glory in Christ. A Pauline Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove 2001, p. 42).

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in [Jerusalem]. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished. About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, «Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?». «Who are you, Lord?», I asked. «I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting», he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. «What shall I do, Lord?» I asked. «Get up», the Lord said, «and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do»²⁴.

Implying that this was a first-person experience, it is stated that ST's companions did not have his same experience, in the following words «My companions saw the light, but they did not understand his voice». This experience was epistemically transformative because even though ST «studied under Gamaliel» and was «trained in the law», he did not know what it is was like to have a first-person experience of God until he had this encounter. Finally, this was a personal transformative experience because when ST went through it, he changed his beliefs, desires, emotions and dispositions. In his words, «whatever were gains to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage [...]»²⁵.

Returning to Parfit's account, he submits that in his imaginary cases 1 through 5, above, the original person survives as two. This means that although the original person is not identical to the resulting people, the former survives. As a consequence, «[t]he relation of the original person to each of the resulting people contains

²⁴ Acts, 22: 3-10

²⁵ Philippians, 3: 7-8

all that interests us—all that matters—in any ordinary case of survival. This is why we need a sense in which one person can survive as two»²⁶. In a more general way, we need criteria for the differentiation between identity and survival. According to Parfit, there are two elements differentiating identity from survival. On one hand, while identity is a binary relationship, survival is not necessarily circumscribed to a pairing. In other words, «[i]dentity is a one-one relation. [...] What matters in survival need not be one-one».²⁷ On the other hand, whereas the excluded middle principle applies to identity, survival is much more complex. «Identity is all-or-nothing. Most of the relations which matter in survival are, in fact, relations of degree»²⁸.

What does it mean that survival is a matter of degree? Parfit's analysis of cases of psychological fusion with incompatible minds (i.e., Case 9, second variant, above) provides some illustration for this point. Given that, in these cases, the dominant mind squelches the weak one, «[t]his makes it easier to say [...] 'I shall not survive'»²⁹. Yet, Parfit insinuates, «fusion would involve the changing of some of our characteristics and some of our desires. But only the very self-satisfied would think of this as death»³⁰. I interpret that Parfit endorses the following condition (C) for survival: x survives as y after the event e iff

C₁: some, but not all, of x 's characteristics and desires change after e .

But this is ambiguous. Where can we draw the line on x 's change to know whether x survives as y ? In other words, if survival is a relation of degree, we can imagine a scale that progressively reduces the grades of survival until a point in which x does not survive as y . The construction of such a scale requires a new differentiation, namely, the distinction between psychological connected-

²⁶ D. PARFIT, *Personal Identity*, cit. p. 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 11.

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

ness and psychological continuity. For Parfit, psychological connectedness requires *direct* psychological relations. Psychological continuity, on the contrary, requires *overlapping* chains of psychological relations. The former is important for survival, and the latter for identity, as I will show in the final section of this paper. How can we understand the required psychological connections? This passage illuminates this point.

On this way of thinking, the word «I» can be used to imply the greatest degree of psychological connectedness. When the connections are reduced, when there has been any marked change of character or style of life, or any marked loss of memory, our imagined beings would say, «It was not I who did that, but an earlier self»³¹.

In our scale of survival, the greatest degree of survival is when no changes of psychological connections occur. The more changes in psychological connections, the lower the degree of survival. This leads to the main point of this paper. Extreme changes in life can be understood as cases of identity without survival.

I submit that ST does not survive as PA because the changes of psychological connections (i.e., the self) between one and the other radically changed. Explaining this change, I will borrow Harry Frankfurt's concept of caring. Two aspects are important here, to be precise, the necessary and sufficient conditions for caring, and the idea of strong caring. Firstly, according to Frankfurt, x cares about ρ iff the following conditions are satisfied³²:

C₂: x consciously guides himself toward ρ .

C₃: x is sensitive to ρ 's enhancements or diminishments.

C₄: x conceives himself as having a future.

C₅: x guides himself toward ρ during a period of time.

C₆: x not necessarily controls ρ .

³¹ Ivi, p. 25.

³² H. FRANKFURT, *The Importance of What We Care About*, in ID., *The Importance of What We Care About. Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 84-85.

C₂ differentiates caring from mere patterns of behavior and habits because it demands from *x* to consciously control his/ her behavior toward ρ . In short, it demands from *x* to be an agent. In C₃, it is expected that *x* is vulnerable with regard to ρ . Here, vulnerability is a relationship such as that if ρ becomes better, “so to speak,” *x* does so as well. By the same token, if *y* worsens, *x*, too, worsens. C₄ and C₅ show the temporal dimension of caring. If *x* cares about ρ , he/she conceives of himself within an agenda to be realized over time. Finally, ρ is not under *x*’s power.

Secondly, there are two ways of caring³³. In a soft manner, *x* controls his caring (i.e., *x* decides to care about ρ , and *x* decides how much he/she cares about ρ). In a strong way, *x* cannot control his caring. This means, *x* cannot do anything else but care about ρ . Frankfurt illustrates this point recalling the case of Luther. He cared strongly about his religious convictions. That is why when he was forced to abandon them, his answer was «Here I stand; *I can do no other*». This apparent impossibility of acting bounded Luther’s identity. He was who he was, given his strong caring.

In the ST/PA case, it is clear how conditions C₂ through C₆ change from ST to PA. ST guided himself toward the annihilation of Christians, but PA was a Christian preacher himself. While ST was concerned about the threat of the Christian sect for the Jewish community in Jerusalem, PA was devoted to the flourishing of the Christian community. Ultimately, both ST and PA could not have done otherwise, but to follow their religious convictions. These radical differences are a strong reason to believe that ST, as PA, does not fulfill C₁. As a consequence, ST does not survive as PA.

3. *The Identity Clause*

Is ST identical to PA? I believe they are. Justifying this claim, I provide two arguments. According to Parfit, «X and Y are the same

³³ Ivi, pp. 85-86.

person if they are psychologically continuous, and there is no person who is contemporary with either and psychologically continuous with the other»³⁴. First and foremost, as it was stated above, Parfit defines psychological continuity as the overlapping chains of direct psychological connections. One way of having these connections is through direct memory connections³⁵. In this sense, PA and ST are one and the same person if PA can now remember having some of the experiences that ST had before. This seems to be the case when PA remembers his past-self as ST, in his words:

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.³⁶

And also,

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.³⁷

Secondly, there was «no person who [was] contemporary with either and psychologically continuous with the other», as it is demanded by Parfit. This is confirmed by PA's contemporaries when, in some of the chronicles of his trips the state that «Saul, who was also called Paul»³⁸.

There is another, more compelling, argument for my view. Saul Kripke in «Identity and Necessity» states «Identity statements between proper names have to be necessary if they are going to be true at all». In order to understand this idea, the distinction be-

³⁴ D. PARFIT, *Personal Identity*, cit. p. 13.

³⁵ D. PARFIT, *Reasons and Persons*, cit., p. 205.

³⁶ Galatians, 1: 13-14.

³⁷ Philippians, 3: 4-6.

³⁸ Acts, 13: 9.

tween rigid and non-rigid designators should be clarified. A designator is a term that refers to something. According to Kripke, a designator is non-rigid when it refers to different objects in different possible worlds. For instance, the expression «the inventor of the bifocals», in this world, refers to Benjamin Franklin. Yet, it is possible to imagine a world in which «the inventor of the bifocals» is not Benjamin Franklin, but any other person. Differently, a rigid designator refers to the same object in all possible worlds³⁹. The expression, «Benjamin Franklin» refers to one specific human being. Anytime we use this term, we refer to the same respective individual, and it is not possible for us to imagine a world in which «Benjamin Franklin» is not Benjamin Franklin». The difference between these two types of designators resides in the kinds of expressions they are. Whereas the non-rigid designators are qualitative descriptions of objects that can be fulfilled by different objects in different possible worlds, the rigid designators are proper names that, stick to the object to which they refer. Identities between proper names are necessary because they refer to the same object in any possible world.

“So far so good”, but, some identities between proper names seem contingent (i.e., they do not seem necessary). In our case, ST refers to one specific person: the Roman citizen born in Tarsus, Cicilia (5 A.D.), disciple of the rabbi Gamaliel I, etc. ST referred to this man from his birth until he started preaching to the, so called, gentiles. Alternatively, PA refers to the same person, but from the moment he started reaching to the gentiles until he was executed in Rome. So, both ST and PA seem contingent because they refer to a person for one specific period of time: «Saul was also called Paul». ⁴⁰ How does Kripke explain this? Let him use the Hesperus/Phosphorus example.⁴¹ At some time, t_1 , Hesperus was the evening star and Phosphorus has the morning star. After that, at t_2 , we discovered that Hesperus is Phosphorus because the two ex-

³⁹ S. KRIPKE, *Identity and Necessity*, in *Metaphysics. An Anthology*, ed. by J. Kim, D. Korman and E. Sosa, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden 2012, p. 125.

⁴⁰ Acts, 13: 9.

⁴¹ S. KRIPKE, *Identity and Necessity*, cit., pp. 132-133.

pressions refer to the planet Venus. This heavenly body, from one perspective, is visible during the morning, and, from other point of view, during the evening. Yet, if «Hesperus» and «Phosphorus» are proper names, and at some point Hesperus was not Phosphorus, then identities between proper names seem contingent. Kripke's response is that this appearance of contingency is a consequence, which wrongly associates the epistemological category of the *a priori* with the metaphysical category of the necessary.⁴² To be sure, the fact that Hesperus is Phosphorus is necessarily true (i.e., there is not a possible world in which Hesperus is not Phosphorus), but we know this *a posteriori* (i.e., when our astrological observation was good enough to identify Venus as the evening star and the morning star). This cognitive limitation does not change the metaphysical character of Hesperus and Phosphorus. By the same token, ST is PA, but the man to whom these names refer was known first as ST. Later, people identify him as PA.

4. *Conclusion*

My starting point was that radical changes in life are not fully understood with the concept of numerical identity. From my perspective, transformative experiences are cases of identity without survival. The problem is not that there is a person at t_1 (i.e., before the transformative experience) and that there is another person at t_2 (i.e., after going through the transformative experience), but that the experiencer changes from t_1 to t_2 in such a radical fashion that he/she does not identify his/her present-self with his/her past-self. More radically, sometimes he/she experiences his/her past-self as if it were dead. The goal of this paper was to account for this experience. Using Parfit's expression, transformative experiences are not «ordinary death» because the experiencer does not cease to exist. The identity clause (i.e., an experiencer at t_1 is the same experiencer at t_2) accounts for this biological survival. However, identity is not enough to explain transformative experiences because people going through them do not identify with, or disown, their past-

⁴² Ivi, p. 130.

selves. Understanding this fracture of the self, first, I borrow Parfit's concept of survival. Once again, here we are not talking about ordinary survival (i.e., the fact of continuing to exist in spite of a life-threatening event). Instead, according to Parfit, what matters for survival are relations of degree. That is to say that a person survives an experience if some, but not all, of his/her characteristics and desires change after going through the experience. Given that survival is a matter of degrees, where do we draw the line of non-survival? Parfit states that «when there has been any marked change of character or style of life ... our imagined beings would say, «It was not I who did that, but an earlier self».⁴³ This means that a person does not survive an experience if most of his/her characteristics and desires change after going through the experience. This explains why, «[s]ome experiences may be epistemically transformative while not being personally transformative» (Paul 2014, p. 17).

⁴³ D. PARFIT, *Personal Identity*, cit. p. 25.