

DAVID MACKIE

PERSONAL IDENTITY AND DEAD PEOPLE

(Received 26 May 1997)

I

The view that psychological continuity is necessary for personal identity remains popular in discussions of personal identity. Indeed, it is probably fair to say that this view currently constitutes orthodoxy. I shall call this view the Psychological Necessity Thesis, or PNT for short.

In this paper I shall advance the following argument against the Psychological Necessity Thesis:

- (1) In some cases of death, what is left behind after the death is a dead person.
- (2) In at least some such cases, the dead person is not psychologically continuous with the earlier living person.
- (3) In such cases, the dead person is identical with the earlier living person.

Therefore

- (4) Psychological continuity is not necessary for personal identity.

What, if anything, is wrong with this *Death Argument*? I am not the first to claim that people can continue to exist, as corpses, after their deaths.¹ Yet this line of thought seems to have had little impact on the personal identity debate. It seems likely that the reason for this is that most philosophers believe that the idea of arguing from the case of death in this way is obviously misguided. My main aim in this paper is to show that that is not so. I shall consider in detail the various possible responses that might be made to the Death Argument, and explain why they fail. I conclude that the argument does, in fact, present a serious challenge to the Psychological Necessity Thesis.



Philosophical Studies 95: 219–242, 1999.

© 1999 Kluwer Academic Publishers. Printed in the Netherlands.

But since there are other, more familiar, arguments against PNT, it is worth explaining first why I think we ought to consider the Death Argument at all.

One obvious reason is simply that proponents of the more familiar arguments have not yet succeeded in persuading the prominent defenders of PNT of the falsity of their view. Defenders of PNT believe that there may be responses to those more familiar arguments. In these circumstances, a new argument may strengthen the case against PNT.

In addition, the Death Argument may have advantages over the more familiar arguments. Other arguments against PNT typically appeal either to imagined cases like the 'brain zap' and the case of brain- (or cerebrum-) removal, or to cases of coma or brain death. These are claimed, by proponents of the arguments, to be cases of identity, or persistence, in the absence of psychological continuity. But rightly or wrongly, many people tend to be suspicious of intuitions elicited by consideration of the imagined cases, mainly on the ground that we may not really know what would be involved; while there is at least some lack of clarity as to whether the cases of coma and brain death really involve psychological discontinuity. By contrast, death is a real phenomenon; and there are cases where it is quite uncontroversial both that the death of a person has occurred and that there is no one psychologically continuous with the earlier living person. That is not to say, of course, that there are no points of controversy here. In defending the Death Argument, I shall make two controversial claims: first, that people can continue to exist after their deaths; secondly, that this fact has the significance I claim it has for the personal identity debate. But if, as I shall show, these claims can be defended, there will be no room for the objection that it is questionable whether I have really described a genuine case of psychological discontinuity, or that it is unclear what my case really involves. In that sense, at least, the Death Argument may present a clearer case than other more familiar arguments against PNT.

Thirdly, my use of the Death Argument serves to draw an important distinction between different non-psychological views about personal identity. Some philosophers who reject PNT defend a view according to which continued life is necessary for the persistence of persons. Perhaps the most obvious example is Olson's 'biological

approach'.² Like Olson, I accept Animalism – the view that we are human beings – and claim that since Animalism is true, PNT is false. But I reject Olson's positive account of our persistence conditions. Consideration of the Death Argument forces us to recognise that Animalists face a genuine choice between different accounts of the persistence conditions of human beings. The question what those conditions are has not been adequately debated in the literature, and there has been a tendency to assume that continued life is required. But, as I shall argue (especially in section VII), that assumption is quite unwarranted.

Finally, as I shall show in section IV, the most common response to the Death Argument betrays a serious confusion in the minds of many about what question it is that we are asking when we try to discover the criterion of personal identity over time. The easiest way to highlight, and clear up, this confusion is to examine the response in question, and show why it is inadequate. That provides an additional reason for considering this Death Argument.

II

The Death Argument is obviously valid. So if there is anything wrong with it, what is wrong must be that at least one of the premisses is false.

Perhaps the most obvious and tempting response is to say that premiss (1) is false, because there is really no such thing as a dead person. What I call a 'dead person' is not in fact a person at all, but just a dead body, or corpse. It might then seem that, since this is so, my Death Argument does not succeed in threatening PNT at all.

I want to emphasise that making this response involves asserting the truth of two quite distinct theses. They are the following:

First Thesis: there is no such thing as a dead person: what I call a 'dead person' is not really a person at all.

Second Thesis: since what I call a 'dead person' is not really a person at all, my Death Argument presents no threat to the Psychological Necessity Thesis. If 'dead people' are not really people (or persons), then they are irrelevant in a discussion of personal identity.

It is important to notice that these are distinct theses, both of which must be true if the suggested response to the Death Argument is to be successful. In sections III and IV I shall consider the two theses in turn. I shall argue (in section III) that there is indeed a way to defend the thesis that ‘dead people’ are not really people (or persons); but I shall also argue (in section IV) that the Second Thesis cannot be defended. Even if what I call ‘dead people’ are not really persons, it does not follow that the Death Argument is irrelevant to the personal identity debate.

III

The First Thesis asserts that there is no such thing as a dead person, or that what I call ‘dead people’ are not really people (or persons).

Some people seem to think that this thesis is obviously correct. But others disagree. Thomson, for example, appears to think that it is an obviously false thesis. That seems to be shown by the fact that in attacking it she restricts herself to asking rhetorically why there couldn’t be some dead people in a house after the roof has fallen in, just as there might be some dead cats there.³ How should this disagreement be resolved?

We do find it natural to call the entities left behind in cases like Thomson’s ‘dead people’. And this usage is not obviously incorrect, or self-contradictory. That means, at least, that defenders of the First Thesis ought to be able to explain away this usage. They should say that, when we talk in this way, we are not really betraying any belief in the existence of things that are really persons, but that are dead. Rather, this is just another way of referring to what we might equally, and more correctly, call dead human bodies, or corpses.

This claim is usually filled out in one of two different ways. According to one view, the phrase ‘dead people’ is like the phrase ‘counterfeit money’.⁴ On this view, in saying that there are some dead people in a house we may say something perfectly true. But this does not mean that dead people are really people (or persons). For, on this view, just as counterfeit money is not really money, so dead people are not really people (or persons). So on this view, saying that there are some dead people in a house involves no

commitment to the claim that there are some things in the house that are really people (or persons), but that are dead.

This view, however, is implausible. The natural way of taking the suggestion is as saying that 'dead' belongs to a certain class of adjectives, of which 'counterfeit' (and (*e.g.*) 'imaginary') are also members. Such a class of adjectives undoubtedly exists. But I can see no good reason for supposing that 'dead' really does belong to this class; while there is at least some reason for supposing that it does not. After all, it follows on this account that for any F, the phrase 'dead F' does not mention something that really is an F. For just as counterfeit money isn't really money, so counterfeit rubies are not really rubies, counterfeit barns are not really barns, and so on. So, if 'dead' is an adjective like 'counterfeit', then just as dead people are not really people, so dead roses will not really be roses, dead butterflies will not really be butterflies, and dead grass will not really be grass. Worse still, dead bodies will not really be bodies. This will strike most people as an unacceptable view. Rather, most people regard it as obviously true that dead grass is grass, and that dead butterflies are butterflies; and it is very doubtful whether anyone could seriously maintain that dead bodies are not really bodies. It is only when it comes to people, or persons, that we are at all inclined to hesitate.⁵

These considerations suggest a second, and better, way to defend the First Thesis. Instead of claiming that 'dead' is an adjective like 'counterfeit', defenders of the First Thesis should say that there is something special about *persons* (as opposed to roses, grass, butterflies and bodies) that means that there is no such thing as a dead person. The obvious suggestion here is that for something to count as a person, it has to satisfy some condition relating to psychological endowment. According to this view, nothing falls under the *person* concept unless it is psychologically endowed in some fairly specific and sophisticated way. This is a familiar feature of the *person* concept as it is understood by many philosophers (and others). It is on the ground that personhood requires a certain kind of psychological endowment that it is often asserted that foetuses at certain stages of development, and patients in a persistent vegetative state, are not persons. And this view, of course, accords with Locke's definition, according to which a person is a "thinking intel-

ligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places".⁶ Clearly, things that are dead fail to satisfy the relevant psychological condition.

One way of making this point would be to say that those who assert the existence of dead people have simply misunderstood the *person* concept. But that would be to overstate the case. Thomson and I are fairly clearly not guilty of any misunderstanding of the concept, and we are not blatantly misusing the English language, when we say that there are dead people. At the most, we are using the term 'person' in a different, but not obviously incorrect, way. The truth therefore seems to be that our concept is at least to some extent ambiguous. We can distinguish two slightly different senses of the term 'person'. On what we can call the strong sense, nothing is a person unless it meets some condition relating to psychological endowment. But there is also a weaker sense of the term, which makes it not incorrect for Thomson and me to say that there are dead people.

It would help to avoid confusion if our concept were not ambiguous in this way. It would be better, perhaps, if we restricted our use of the term 'person' to refer to things that are persons in the strong sense. No doubt some people, including many of those who write about personal identity, already restrict their usage in this way. And it may be that this practice will one day become universal. In the meantime, to avoid confusion, I shall from now on use 'Person' (with a capital P) to mean 'person in the strong sense': nothing is a Person that does not satisfy the relevant condition relating to psychological endowment. But I shall allow myself to continue to talk about 'dead people', and 'the dead person'. When I do, I should be understood as using the terms 'person' and 'people' in the weak sense only.

IV

Dead people are not Persons. So I accept that premiss (1) in the Death Argument is false if taken as referring to Persons. A tempting response to the argument at this point is to say that this means that the Death Argument is irrelevant to the personal identity debate,

and hence does not threaten PNT. According to this response, since dead people are not Persons, they are not among the entities whose persistence conditions that debate seeks to discover. To say this is of course to assert the truth of what in section II I called the Second Thesis. It is to say that dead people fall outside the scope of the personal identity debate, because they are not Persons.

The assumption that this is so can *seem* plausible: it seems to cohere with the fact that the subject is called *personal* identity, and with the view that Locke's definition of 'person', which picks out what I have called the strong sense of 'person', is somehow central to the debate. At any rate, it is obviously correct that it is Persons whose persistence conditions we are supposed to be investigating. It may seem to follow that dead people, who, as I admit, are not Persons, are not relevant to the debate.

That inference, however, is fallacious. You and I are Persons; and our persistence conditions are certainly under investigation in the debate. But defenders of PNT need more than this if they are to establish the irrelevance of the Death Argument. For what that argument asserts is that something that is a Person at one time may continue to exist, in the absence of psychological continuity, at a later time, when it is no longer a Person.⁷ Now that clearly *is* an assertion about the persistence conditions of something that is a Person. So to point out that the personal identity debate is an investigation of the persistence conditions of Persons is evidently not to show that the Death Argument is irrelevant.

The Death Argument would be irrelevant only if the strong sense of 'person' defined the personal identity debate in a more restricted way than this. The easiest way to see this is to consider two different questions that we might ask about personal identity.⁸ One question, which I shall call the *wide question*, asks:

What is the relation between a Person at one time, and something at another time, which makes these (numerically) identical – one and the same thing?

The *narrow question* asks:

What is the relation between a Person at one time, and a Person at another time, which makes these (numerically) identical – one and the same Person?

The Death Argument would be irrelevant if the personal identity debate were restricted to the narrow question. Defenders of PNT

would then merely be asserting the truth of the restricted claim that something that is a Person at one time is identical with something that is a Person at another time only if a relation of psychological continuity holds between them. Since a dead person is not a Person, the Death Argument is clearly irrelevant to, and could not threaten, this restricted claim.

But contemporary defenders of PNT do not merely seek to defend this restricted claim. If they did, they could (without contradicting themselves) agree with me when I suggest that I could continue to exist in the absence of psychological continuity. PNT would merely be the conditional claim that *if* I, who am now a Person, persist in the absence of psychological continuity, then I shall do so without being a Person. This conditional claim is clearly consistent with my suggestion. But this conditional claim is not at all what contemporary defenders of PNT take themselves to be defending. Rather, they are making the stronger claim that I could not persist *at all* without psychological continuity. They are answering the wide question, not the narrow one. Theirs is a claim about my (your, their) persistence full stop, not about my (your, their) persistence-as-a-Person. That is, theirs is a position in a debate which they do not take to be restricted to the narrow question.

This is often obscured by the way in which these same philosophers typically formulate the question about personal identity that they are addressing. In introducing their subject, they usually write as if they were attempting to answer only the narrow question. Parfit's practice is typical: in his most recent article on the subject, he writes:

Questions about our numerical identity all take the following form. We have two ways of referring to a person, and we ask whether these are ways of referring to the same person. . . . To answer such questions, we must know the *criterion* of personal identity: the relation between a person at one time, and a person at another time, which makes these one and the same person.⁹

Given the natural tendency of many to understand 'person' as meaning 'Person', this formulation suggests that Parfit takes the question about the criterion of personal identity to be what I have called the narrow question. But that is not so. In defending PNT, he does not take himself to be defending the restricted claim that psychological continuity is necessary for my persistence *as a Person*; rather, he is

claiming that I could not persist *at all*, in the absence of a psychologically continuous successor. He thinks that I am wrong when I say that I could continue to exist after my death, without being psychologically continuous with my earlier living self. And he thinks that PNT is in genuine conflict with what I say. That shows that PNT is meant to be part of an answer to the wide question, and not to the narrow one. Parfit is not in the least unusual in this respect. The whole modern personal identity debate is conducted largely in terms of questions about what would happen to me, or some other named Person, in various imagined cases. In discussion of such questions, it is *not* standardly assumed that any resulting entity that is not a Person is *ipso facto* not a candidate for identification with the original Person. For example: it is *evident* that no Person is located where a human body from which the cerebrum has been removed is located. But Olson is not regarded as having missed the point, or as having said something false, in claiming that if he would remain where his body was if his cerebrum were transplanted, then PNT is false.¹⁰ It is true, as I have said, that many philosophers formulate the problem as if they were interested in the narrow question, and not the wide question; and some are initially inclined to respond to the Death Argument in the way that I am currently criticising. But that is evidence of a failure clearly to distinguish between those questions; it is not evidence that it was the narrow question that they meant to address all along.

Not only are prominent modern defenders of PNT *in fact* concerned to answer the wide question, rather than the narrow one; there is also a good reason why the debate *ought* not to be restricted to the narrow question. After all, our main interest, in investigating personal identity, is in ourselves: we want to know what our persistence conditions are. If, in trying to discover our persistence conditions, we restrict ourselves to the narrow question, we shall be guilty of assuming without argument that we are *essentially* Persons – that we could not continue to exist without being Persons.¹¹

It follows that it is not enough for defenders of PNT to point out that dead people are not Persons. That observation is true; but it does not mean that the Death Argument is irrelevant to the personal identity debate. In discussing personal identity, we are investigating our persistence conditions. If I, who am currently a Person, am the

kind of thing that could continue to exist in a dead state, when it is not psychologically continuous with the earlier living Person, then PNT will be incorrect. It will be incorrect even if, when I am in that dead state, I do not qualify as a Person. It will be incorrect because it gets my persistence conditions wrong. Accordingly, to point out that dead people are not Persons is completely inadequate as a response to the Death Argument. Premiss (1) is true, when 'person' is understood in the weak sense. And that is the only sense in which it needs to be true.

V

I have now argued that my Death Argument cannot be resisted by denying the first premiss. That premiss is indeed false if taken as suggesting that there are dead Persons. But that, as I have shown, is of no significance. Dead people are not irrelevant to the personal identity debate just because they are not Persons.

A different response to the Death Argument might challenge, instead, the second premiss. That is the premiss that asserts psychological discontinuity between the dead person and the earlier living Person. If we challenge premiss (2), we make the following set of claims: There are dead people; but even if these dead people are identical with the earlier living Persons whose bodies they have, that constitutes no threat to PNT; for these dead people are psychologically continuous with those earlier living Persons.¹²

Such a challenge, however, is utterly implausible. We might, just conceivably, be prepared to grant that *some* dead people might be counted as psychologically continuous with earlier living Persons; if we did, it would have to be because we were persuaded that, after death, their brains retained some structural organisation such that, if (somehow) they could be revived, they might pick up their psychological lives where they left off. But this cannot be true of all dead people. Not all dead people's brains do retain any such structural organisation. If we 'scrambled' the cerebrum of some dead person, that would certainly be sufficient to ensure psychological discontinuity. Such a procedure would destroy the structure in virtue of which the dead person might otherwise have been said to be psychologically continuous with the earlier living Person. Defenders

of PNT who try to resist the Death Argument by denying premiss (2) must therefore claim that such a scrambling procedure would cause the dead person to cease to exist. On this view, we could have a dead person before us; but we could cause that dead person to cease to exist simply by inserting a sharp instrument into the head and scrambling the cerebrum. That is surely implausible. It seems clear that if dying is not sufficient for non-existence, then dying and having one's cerebrum scrambled will not be sufficient either.

VI

I have now argued that the Death Argument cannot be resisted by challenging either premiss (1) or premiss (2). To avoid the conclusion of the Death Argument, then, defenders of PNT must instead challenge premiss (3). That is the premiss that asserts identity between the dead person and the earlier living Person.

I shall defend premiss (3) by appeal to two claims that I believe to be correct. The first is that what I am is an animal – a human being. The second is that human beings do not necessarily cease to exist when they die. Because I accept these two claims, I believe that sometimes, when someone dies, the human being that he is continues to exist. What is left, after the death, is a dead human being that is (identical with) the earlier living Person.

The first claim – that what I am is a human being – amounts to the thesis known as Animalism. A large, and growing, number of philosophers working in the field already accept (some version of) Animalism. They include Snowdon, Olson, Wiggins, Parfit, McDowell, Ayers, Carter, and van Inwagen.¹³ But I cannot hope to give a complete defence of Animalism here. That would require an article, or more likely a book, of its own. For this reason, I shall have nothing to say here by way of detailed reply to a defender of PNT who agrees with me that Animalism is inconsistent with PNT, but who takes that to be a reason for rejecting Animalism. Such an approach seems to me mistaken, because I believe that Animalism is much better supported than PNT. But I cannot defend my view in full here. The most I can do is to refer readers to the excellent defences of Animalism that have been presented by others.¹⁴

There is, however, one objection to Animalism that I want to address here, for two reasons. The first is simply that it has not yet been adequately dealt with in the literature. The second reason is that answering this objection helps to clarify still further the issue I raised in section IV about what question it is that we should be addressing when we discuss personal identity.

This is the objection that Animalism is unjustifiably anthropocentric. According to this objection, Animalism is guilty of ruling out *a priori* the possibility that there might be non-human Persons.

What I want to emphasise is that this objection applies only if Animalism has to be stated as the thesis that the term 'Person' names a particular biological kind – namely, the species *Homo sapiens*. That thesis implies that, necessarily, all Persons are human beings. That thesis is indeed objectionable. It strikes us as objectionable principally because we are inclined to think that the possession of certain psychological capacities is sufficient for Personhood, and we have no good reason to assume that human beings are the only things that could possess such capacities. We are not entitled to assume that there could not be non-human Persons: there might be, for example, Martian Persons, or robotic Persons who were not human beings; and if God, Satan, or angels existed, they too would presumably be Persons, but not human beings.

This only shows, however, that Animalism should not be stated in this objectionable way. Animalists should not claim that 'Person' denotes a particular biological kind, so that, necessarily, all Persons are human beings. Instead, they should claim, as Snowdon does, only that *we* are human beings.¹⁵ This formulation is free of the offending assumption.

This formulation of Animalism, of course, invites the question 'Who are "we"?''. To this question, the answer must be that 'we' means you, me, and those other Persons who are of the same substantial kind as us.

When Animalism is formulated in this way, some will object that it is of only limited value in a discussion of personal identity. Proponents of Animalism generally believe that their view is of interest because it promises to help to answer the question what the criterion of personal identity is. It promises to do so by telling us what kind of things we are. If, as Animalism asserts, we are human

beings, then our persistence criteria are the same as those of the human beings with which we are identical. But if it is admitted, as I agree it must be, that 'we' are not the only possible Persons, then Animalism is not a thesis about all possible Persons. Some will object that, since this is so, Animalism can only be of limited value in answering the question what the criterion of personal identity is. At most, it promises to tell us something about the persistence conditions of *some* Persons.

This new objection assumes that, in giving an answer to the question what the criterion of personal identity is, we ought to be giving an answer to a question about the persistence conditions of all possible Persons. Now if the question we should be addressing is what in section IV I called the *wide question*, then this assumption may seem justified. That question, we recall, asks:

What is the relation between a Person at one time, and something at another time, which makes these (numerically) identical – one and the same thing?

On one reading, this is indeed a question about all possible Persons, and not just about human ones like you and me. But we are now in a position to see more clearly that we should not be addressing such a question when we discuss personal identity. If there are, or could be, Persons who are not human beings, then it is reasonable to think that there may be no single criterion of identity over time for all possible Persons. It is reasonable to think this precisely because the range of things that could count as Persons includes things that may be of widely differing kinds. God, if He existed, would on most views be an immaterial Person (or three Persons). It is at least plausible that that might make Him a very different kind of entity from the human organisms that, according to Animalism, you and I are. Robotic Persons would be material; but they might presumably still be completely different kinds of entities from us: for one thing, they would not be biological entities at all. And even if Martian Persons were animals, they might yet be very different sorts of animals from the human animals that you and I are.

But if possible Persons include, as this suggests, things that could be of many different kinds, then there is no reason to assume that all possible Persons will have the same persistence conditions. This means that there is no reason to assume that there will be any single answer to the *wide question* if we understand it as a ques-

tion about all possible Persons. But unless we have a reason to assume that it will have a single answer, that is not the question that we ought to set ourselves. Instead, we should ask a question about ourselves. We should understand the *wide question* not as a question about all possible Persons, but as a question about a limited subset of possible Persons, who we have good reason to think will all have the same persistence conditions. This subset should include us human Persons, of course, because it is our persistence that we are principally interested in.

I suspect that most philosophers working in this field have not considered thoroughly the distinction that I draw here between different formulations of ‘the’ question about personal identity. But it is worth pointing out that at least two features of the actual practice of those working in this field lend support to my view that in investigating personal identity we ought not to set ourselves a question about the persistence conditions of all possible Persons.

First, it would be absurd to assume that we could answer such a question by restricting ourselves to considering what would happen to *us* in various real and imagined cases. Yet most philosophers working in this field plainly *do* hope to answer the question they are addressing by finding out about *our* persistence conditions. All the thought experiments that they employ concern human beings. These philosophers do not think that they need to consider cases involving God, or robotic, or Martian, Persons, in order to answer their question. That suggests that, implicitly at least, they are not concerned to answer a question about all possible Persons.

Secondly, the views that many of these philosophers actually present as answers to the question about the criterion of personal identity are views that could not be meant to apply to all possible Persons. The popular view that brain continuity is necessary for personal identity, for example, can hardly be meant to apply to God’s persistence, or to the persistence of such brainless alien Persons as might exist. Most proponents of this view don’t suppose that, in holding it, they are *ipso facto* committed to denying that there might be such brainless Persons. Again, this suggests that these philosophers are really only concerned to answer a question about Persons of the same substantial kind as us, and not a question about all possible Persons.

I am not denying outright that there might be a single answer to the wide question understood as a question about all possible Persons. For example, if Lowe is right in thinking that Persons are psychological substances, then it does have a single answer.¹⁶ And although it is evident from what I have said so far that I do not myself accept Lowe's view, I have not argued directly against it here. What I am emphasising, rather, is that, in discussing personal identity, it would be folly to set ourselves a question about the persistence conditions of all possible Persons, and to continue to try to find 'the' answer, if that involves assuming without argument that there really is a single answer to that question. We should set ourselves a question that does not beg the question in that way. And, as I have suggested, most of those working in the field at least implicitly (and probably subconsciously) do this, by concerning themselves with a question that is restricted to those Persons who it is reasonable to assume do share the same persistence conditions – namely, you, me, and other normal human beings.

Animalism, then, should be stated, as Snowdon states it, as a thesis about *our* persistence, and not as a thesis about all possible Persons. This renders it innocent of the charge of anthropocentrism. The criticism that Animalism, when stated in this way, could be of limited value only in answering the question about personal identity turns out to be unfounded. In explaining why this is so, I have made it clearer what question it is, precisely, that we ought to be asking when we investigate 'the criterion of personal identity'.

VII

Even those who accept Animalism, however, may still doubt the truth of premiss (3) in the Death Argument. That was the premiss that asserted identity between the dead person and the earlier living Person.

Now, if dead human beings exist at all, they are presumably identical with those earlier living human beings whose bodies they have. If we deny this, we face the question who these dead human beings are. They cannot plausibly be identical with any other already existing human beings; so on this view they must be brand new human beings. This is surely unacceptable: it commits us to the

absurd view that killing human beings could be a way of creating brand new human beings. Since this is so, Animalists who deny premiss (3) in the Death Argument ought to deny that there are any dead human beings at all. They ought to doubt the truth of my second claim – that human beings do not necessarily cease to exist when they die. They must accept what I shall call the *Termination Thesis* – the thesis that human beings necessarily cease to exist at the time of their deaths.

The Termination Thesis strongly conflicts with what ordinary people believe. Non-philosophers think that the Termination Thesis is not only false, but obviously so. Their view can be outlined as follows.

Members of other biological species do not necessarily cease to exist when they die. As Feldman has pointed out, the suggestion that a butterfly collector does not really have butterflies in his collection would be greeted with astonishment by any non-philosopher.¹⁷ The items in the collector's collection are dead; but that does not mean that they are not really butterflies. This man goes out in the morning with a net, and spends the day catching butterflies. In the evening he comes home and mounts them. Those who think that members of biological kinds necessarily cease to exist when they die have to say that the things this man mounts in the evening are not the butterflies that he caught during the day, but some other items – namely, butterfly corpses. But *why* deny that butterfly corpses are members of the biological kind *butterfly*? These corpses owe every feature they have – their physical structure, chemical composition and so on – to the fact that they are products of biological processes distinctive of the biological species in question. It is reasonable to suggest that it is precisely because these are butterflies that it is possible to learn about butterflies by studying such collections. *Why* think that the mere absence of life means that they are not butterflies?

Similar remarks apply to the members of other biological species. It would be, if anything, even more astonishing to suggest that dead roses are not really roses, or that dead grass is not really grass. But if biological entities in general do not necessarily cease to exist when they die, there is no reason to think that the members of our biological species are any different in this respect. Living human beings, then, can become dead human beings. And this too is what we ordin-

arily believe. We do indeed distinguish between a man freshly dead – he is dead, but still there – and the pile of ashes remaining after his cremation.

Non-philosophers, then, regard my view that members of biological species do not necessarily cease to exist when they die as an obvious truth. That means, at least, that those who endorse the Termination Thesis need some very strong grounds for doing so. My view can with fairness be regarded as the default view here.

Now it seems that some philosophers do have what they think are special philosophical grounds for accepting the Termination Thesis. Feldman has already discussed a number of arguments for it.¹⁸ But, as Feldman has conclusively demonstrated, the three arguments he discusses – the Argument from Definition, the Argument from Personal Dualism, and the Argument from Personality – are all very weak, and entirely question-begging, and I shall not discuss them here.

It may fairly be said, however, that the three arguments discussed by Feldman do not exhaust the considerations that might be advanced in support of the Termination Thesis. In the remainder of this section, I shall therefore consider what seem to me to be the remaining considerations that might be advanced. I shall show that they fail to give adequate support to the Termination Thesis; and I shall conclude that, in the absence of alternative arguments, the Termination Thesis should be rejected.

Some of those who accept the Termination Thesis may do so because they want to respect what they take to be an important insight of Locke's. Locke famously distinguished between the identity conditions of masses of matter on the one hand, and living organisms on the other. It is indeed reasonable to draw such a distinction: unlike masses of matter, biological organisms take on, and lose, matter as part of their natural way of living. Trees and other biological organisms do not cease to exist when they lose or gain matter (e.g. through metabolic processes); rather, losing and gaining matter in this way is part of how they typically persist. It is therefore reasonable to claim that any plausible view of the persistence conditions of human beings will respect this difference between biological organisms and Lockean masses of matter.

In drawing this distinction, Locke additionally claimed that it was necessary for the persistence of biological items like trees and men (what we would call human beings) that they remain alive.

We must therefore consider wherein an Oak differs from a Mass of Matter, and that seems to me to be in this; that the one is only the Cohesion of Particles of Matter any how united, the other such a disposition of them as constitutes the parts of an Oak; and such an Organization of those parts, as is fit to receive, and distribute nourishment, so as to continue, and frame the Wood, Bark, and Leaves, *etc.* of an Oak, in which consists the vegetable Life. That being then one Plant, which has such an Organization of Parts in one coherent Body, partaking of one Common Life, it continues to be the same Plant, as long as it partakes of the same Life, though that Life be communicated to new Particles of Matter vitally united to the living Plant, in a like continued Organization, conformable to the sort of Plants.¹⁹

... the Identity of the same *Man* consists ... in nothing but a participation of the same continued Life, by constantly fleeting Particles of Matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized Body.²⁰

Locke's account of the persistence conditions of biological organisms, then, respects his own insight – that living organisms must have different persistence conditions from masses of matter. It does so by giving an account of the persistence conditions of human beings according to which human beings necessarily cease to exist when they die. But it is to be emphasised that the need to respect the important Lockean insight does not oblige us to accept, as Locke did, the Termination Thesis. For it is evident that we can respect the Lockean insight here without endorsing Locke's own view of the persistence conditions of human beings, and without accepting the Termination Thesis. The obvious alternative is to suggest that the persistence of biological organisms depends on their retaining (enough of) the organisation of parts that is the product of their natural biological development, and that makes them apt for life, while stopping short of saying that life itself is necessary. If we adopt this view, we can agree that there is a difference between the identity conditions of masses of matter and those of organisms, and that this difference is connected with the fact that it is characteristic and/or distinctive of biological organisms that they take on, and lose matter as part of their natural life cycles – indeed, that this is *how they naturally live* – without believing that biological organisms necessarily cease to exist when they die.

Part of what Locke himself says in this context might actually lead a reader to think of this alternative to Locke's own view. (This is *not* to suggest that we should interpret Locke as suggesting, or even being aware of, this alternative.) At one point, he writes that a plant continues to exist during all the time that its parts "exist united in that continued Organization, which *is fit to* convey that Common Life to all the Parts so united".²¹ Now the parts of an organism plainly *can* be organised in such a way that they are *fit to* convey life to the organism, even if they are not actually doing so. Freshly dead trees, butterflies and human beings may retain an almost perfectly intact organisation of their parts. I propose, then, as an alternative to the Termination Thesis, the view that biological organisms persist as long as this organisation of constituent parts remains sufficiently nearly intact.²² This view enables us to respect Locke's insight, whilst retaining the commonsense view that there really are such things as dead butterflies, dead roses, and dead human beings.

Moreover, Locke's own analogy with the watch counts against the Termination Thesis. He argues that on his account the identity of biological organisms is similar to that of machines like watches, for a watch is

... nothing but a fit Organization, or Construction of Parts, to a certain end, which, when a sufficient force is added to it, it is capable to attain. If we would suppose this Machine one continued Body, all whose organized Parts were repair'd, increas'd or diminish'd, by a constant Addition or Separation of insensible Parts, with one Common Life, we should have something very much like the Body of an Animal, with this difference, That in an Animal the fitness of the Organization, and the Motion wherein Life consists, begin together, the motion coming from within; but in Machines the force, coming sensibly from without, is often away, when the Organ is in order, and well fitted to receive it.²³

As Locke seems to recognise, it would clearly be wrong to apply the analogue of the Termination Thesis to watches. When the force that drives the watch is absent, the watch still exists. In fact, even when a watch is broken, and will not work, as for example when some vital part (say, the mainspring) is hopelessly damaged, no one seriously supposes that the watch has ceased to exist. What we have, rather, is a broken, perhaps even an irreparably broken, watch. Though it is broken, it is still the very same watch as the one we previously had, which used to work, and tell the time. It is natural to suggest that we can still have the same watch in such circumstances

because *enough* of the watch's parts remain, in a *sufficiently similar* structural organisation. But, if we find the analogy between animals (biological machines) and watches (artefactual machines) attractive, why should we not give an analogous account of the persistence of animals? Why not say that animals, like watches, can continue to exist, even when they are irreparably broken (that is, dead), provided that they retain enough of their parts, in a sufficiently similar state of organisation? If Locke's analogy between machines like watches and biological organisms really holds, it actually provides a further reason for rejecting the Termination Thesis.

Locke's insight, then, provides no good reason for accepting the Termination Thesis. And the alternative suggestion that I have made also shows that a second consideration that might be adduced in support of the Termination Thesis is without force. Olson implies that, unless we accept the view that human animals necessarily cease to exist when they die, it is hard to see what it does take for a human animal to cease to exist.²⁴ But that is not so. In rejecting the Termination Thesis, we can retain a view that gives a plausible and principled answer to the question what it takes for an organism to cease to exist. An organism persists for as long as it retains enough of its parts, in a sufficiently similar state of organisation.

On this view, no precise line is drawn specifying how much counts as enough, or what counts as sufficient similarity. There will be cases in which it is indeterminate whether the human being still exists. It might finally be claimed that the Termination Thesis is preferable to this view, precisely because it avoids such indeterminacies. But that is dubious, to say the least. For one thing, it is not obvious that the fact that a proposed criterion allows there to be indeterminate cases constitutes any threat to its plausibility. Secondly, the idea that if we adopt the Termination Thesis we can avoid such cases is itself dubious. For it is far from clear that plausible criteria of life can be specified such that all possibility of indeterminate cases will be eliminated.

In this section I have shown that further considerations that might be advanced in support of the Termination Thesis in fact have little force. And other arguments for the thesis, as Feldman has already shown, are quite inadequate. But as far as I know there are no grounds other than these for accepting the Termination Thesis. And

as I have already said, we should need a very strong reason for accepting that thesis, since doing so would involve the rejection of our natural conviction that living organisms can become dead organisms. I conclude that we should favour the commonsense view, and reject the Termination Thesis.

VIII

That completes my defence of premiss (3) in the Death Argument. There was not room for me to give a complete defence of Animalism myself in this paper; but strong arguments for Animalism have been advanced by others. And if we do accept Animalism, then we ought to believe that it is possible for us to continue to exist after our deaths. For we are human beings; and there are no adequate reasons for abandoning the ordinary view that living human beings can become, and hence continue to exist as, dead human beings. Since that is so, premiss (3) is true: a dead person is identical with the earlier living Person whose body he has.

But as I argued in sections II to V, the Death Argument cannot be blocked by denying either of the other two premisses. I therefore submit that this argument is sound, and that the Psychological Necessity Thesis should be rejected. Now as I said at the start, I am well aware that other arguments against PNT already exist in the literature; and I myself believe that those arguments can be made compelling. So far as the rejection of PNT is concerned, then, my own view is that my Death Argument merely represents philosophical overkill. But even for those who share my view that those more familiar arguments can be made compelling, consideration of the Death Argument is not without value. For it is not only defenders of PNT who tell me that the Death Argument is obviously flawed. In explaining why that is not so, I hope that, as well as presenting and defending a new argument against PNT, I have done something to clear up some serious confusions about what question it is that we ought to be addressing when we discuss personal identity.²⁵

NOTES

¹ Judith Thomson is a prominent dissenter from the Psychological Necessity Thesis; she recognises that her own view that people are bodies commits her to the view that there are dead people who are identical with earlier living people; and she has argued that this commitment is unproblematic (see Thomson (forthcoming)). Fred Feldman has published an extended defence of the view that people can continue to exist for a while after their deaths. He does not use the term ‘psychological continuity’, or relate his claims explicitly to the personal identity debate; but he considers, and rejects, criticisms of this view that are based on claims about the relevance of psychology to the persistence of persons; and it is clear that his own position must be that his views about death are inconsistent with PNT (see Feldman (1992), ch. 6). And Eric Olson, though he himself rejects this view, mentions that many people believe that organisms can continue to exist, as corpses, after their deaths (Olson (1997a), p. 119). Note that the Death Argument can be regarded as a kind of temporal mirror image of the (perhaps more familiar) argument that, since foetuses are identical with, but not psychologically continuous with, later people, PNT is false (see, for example, Carter (1982), Olson (1997b), (1997a), ch. 4).

² See Olson (1997a).

³ Thomson (forthcoming).

⁴ I first heard this view from E. J. Lowe.

⁵ Some philosophers claim to be untroubled by this objection. They do deny that dead grass is grass; for they think that they have sound theoretical reasons for accepting the view that living things necessarily cease to exist at the time of their deaths. I discuss their view further in section VII.

⁶ Locke (1975), II. xxvii. 9.

⁷ This is to say, of course, that *Person* is what Wiggins calls a phased-sortal. See Wiggins (1980), pp. 24–27.

⁸ Cf. Eric Olson’s clear presentation of the same point in Olson (1997a), ch. 2.

⁹ Parfit (1995), p. 14.

¹⁰ Olson (1994).

¹¹ This is not to deny that a philosopher might *choose* to restrict his inquiry to what I have called the narrow question. Plainly one could choose to restrict oneself to the task of identifying the necessary and sufficient conditions of the persistence of Persons *as Persons*. But the narrow question is the less interesting question, for two reasons. First, the range of possible answers to it is narrower. Secondly, and more importantly, an answer to the narrow question is not guaranteed to be an answer to the question what *our* persistence conditions are; the narrow question does not ask explicitly for the persistence conditions of members of the substantial kind to which we belong. Since we do want answers to questions such as ‘When did I begin to exist?’, it is the wide question that we should set ourselves, not the narrow one.

¹² This line of reply was first suggested to me by Derek Parfit.

- ¹³ See e.g. Snowdon (1990); Olson (1994); Wiggins (1980), ch. 6; Parfit (forthcoming); McDowell (forthcoming); Ayers (1991), ch. 25; Carter (1982), (1989); van Inwagen (1990), section 14.
- ¹⁴ See especially Snowdon (1990), (1991); Olson (1994), (1997a).
- ¹⁵ Snowdon (1991), p. 109; (1990), pp. 84–86.
- ¹⁶ See Lowe (1991).
- ¹⁷ Feldman (1992), pp. 34f., 93–95.
- ¹⁸ Feldman (1992), pp. 96–104.
- ¹⁹ Locke (1975), II. xxvii. 4.
- ²⁰ Locke (1975), II. xxvii. 6.
- ²¹ Locke (1975), II. xxvii. 4 (my emphasis).
- ²² In saying that the organisation of parts must remain sufficiently nearly intact, I should not claim that complete, or even very nearly complete, intactness is required. I am not claiming, for example, that it is necessary for the persistence of a human being that it actually *be apt* for life, if that is understood as meaning that it would have to be so perfectly intact that it might in principle be revivable. That is an implausibly strong requirement. For the purposes of this paper, however, the exact details of the view I defend are unimportant.
- ²³ Locke (1975), II. xxvii. 5.
- ²⁴ Olson (1997a), p. 119.
- ²⁵ I am very grateful to Paul Snowdon, Derek Parfit, Eric Olson, Joan Mackie, Robert Frazier, Katharine Drummond and an anonymous referee of *Philosophical Studies* for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

REFERENCES

- Ayers, M. (1991): *Locke, Volume II: Ontology*, London: Routledge.
- Carter, W.R. (1982): 'Do Zygotes Become People?', *Mind* 91, pp. 77–95.
- Carter, W.R. (1989): 'How to Change Your Mind', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 19, pp. 1–14.
- Cockburn, D. (ed.) (1991): *Human Beings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Feldman, F. (1992): *Confrontations with the Reaper*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Locke, J. (1975): *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, P.H. Nidditch (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lowe, E.J. (1991): 'Real Selves: Persons as a Substantial Kind', in Cockburn (1991).
- McDowell, J. (forthcoming): 'Reductionism and the First Person', in J. Dancy (ed.), *Reading Parfit*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Olson, E. (1994): 'Is Psychology Relevant to Personal Identity?' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 72, pp. 173–186.
- Olson, E. (1997a): *The Human Animal*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Olson, E. (1997b): 'Was I Ever a Fetus?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57, pp. 95–110.
- Parfit, D. (1995): 'The Unimportance of Identity', in H. Harris (ed.), *Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parfit, D. (forthcoming): *The Metaphysics of the Self*.
- Snowdon, P.F. (1990): 'Persons, Animals, and Ourselves', in C. Gill (ed.), *The Person and the Human Mind: Issues in Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Snowdon, P.F. (1991): 'Personal Identity and Brain Transplants', in Cockburn (1991).
- Thomson, J. (forthcoming): 'People and their Bodies', in J. Dancy (ed.), *Reading Parfit*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Van Inwagen, P. (1990): *Material Beings*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Wiggins, D. (1980): *Sameness and Substance*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Corpus Christi College
Oxford OX1 4JF
UK