

Why There Still Are People: A Response to Stone

According to *Eliminativism* about personal identity (henceforth EPI), *persons* do not exist. Many of the varieties of *Reductionism* that have been discussed in connection with the analysis of our identity over time are compatible with the existence of persons.¹ Thus, we should not equate Reductionism with EPI. EPI is most likely not a widely held position, but it has had its share of defenders. David Hume has often been read as arguing for EPI. When one looks inward, one is acquainted with perceptions but no self. Given Hume's empiricism, there is no reason to think that the self exists; there are only bundles of perceptions.² Bertrand Russell, Peter Unger, and various schools of Buddhism have also offered arguments in favor of EPI.³ I intend here to concentrate upon a more recent argument put forward by Jim Stone in support of EPI.⁴ This argument is of special interest since it relies upon Derek Parfit's intriguing conclusion concerning identity and what matters.

Stone's EPI Argument

Stone's argument is simple.

¹ See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, for a discussion of various kinds of Reductionism.

² One might thus try to identify the self with a particular bundle. My goal here isn't to *prove* that Hume accepted EPI.

³ Of course, the relationship between Parfit's earlier views and EPI is unclear. Given more recent writings, it is clear that Parfit rejects EPI.

⁴ Jim Stone, "Why There Still Are No People," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, January 2005, 174-92.

(Premise One) If identity is not what matters in survival, then nothing matters in survival.

(Premise Two) If nothing matters in survival, then EPI is true.

(Premise Three) Identity is not what matters in survival.

(Conclusion) EPI is true.

The argument is valid, so let us turn to the premises. Immediately, a problem arises with respect to the third premise.

Premise Three

Surprisingly, the third premise receives the least amount of support from Stone. Stone's main argument for the conclusion that identity is not what matters is stated in the following passage.

On the Reductionist account, a person just consists in the existence of a brain and body, and the occurrence of a series of interrelated physical and mental states.

The fact of a person's identity through time consists in the holding of certain more particular facts which can be fully described in a wholly impersonal way.... The

argument above [premises one and two] concludes that either identity is what matters or there are no persons; *but if identity is nothing more than these other relations, it is not what matters.*⁵

This sounds quite like Parfit's *Argument from Below*, which asserts that if the facts concerning personal identity consist in (supervene upon, are nothing more than) other facts, then it must be the latter which ultimately matter.⁶ Stone gives us more evidence that this indeed is his position when he states, "Reductionism entails that identity is not what matters."⁷

Stone's limited defense of his third premise faces myriad difficulties. First, Parfit's *Argument from Below* is far from convincing. Many agree that our identity over time just consists in the holding of various physical and/or psychological facts (i.e. are Reductionists). However, some of the same philosophers also deny that identity is not what matters. Ernest Sosa has argued that perhaps we ought to value the facts in which personal identity is supposed to consist *more*, not value identity less.⁸ Additionally, a beautiful statue, according to some views, consists in a piece of clay. Does this mean that we do not value *the statue*, but only the piece of clay?

One might respond here that I am forgetting about Parfit's main argument for Stone's third premise, the *My Division* argument. Here it is concluded that identity is not what matters since when I divide, I bear the same relation (minus identity) to Lefty and Righty, that I bear to Lefty when the other transplant is botched. The problem here for

⁵ Stone, 175, my emphasis.

⁶ Parfit, "Why Our Identity is not What Matters".

⁷ Stone, 179.

⁸ Ernest Sosa, "Surviving Matters".

Stone should be obvious. Stone cannot employ Parfit's My Division argument since the argument establishes that identity is not what matters, not directly, but by first proving that *psychological continuity* (the R relation) is what matters. And if psychological continuity matters, then something matters. Hence, Stone's first premise is false. Using Parfit's My Division argument would allow Stone to provide support for the third premise, but at the cost of undermining the first premise of the argument.

Finally, as we shall see shortly, Stone rejects Parfit's *psychological* theory of personal identity. Parfit's My Division argument relies upon the fact that I = Lefty when Righty is not brought into existence to establish that what matters is preserved. It is not obvious that Stone's preferred theory of personal identity is compatible with this claim. If Lefty is created by moving only cerebral matter (enough to preserve psychological continuity), then most *Animalists*, those who identify each of us with a human animal, would deny that I = Lefty in the absence of Righty in such a case. Furthermore, any argument structurally similar to Parfit's My Division argument, but consistent with Animalism, would raise problems for Stone. Such an argument might establish that identity is not what matters, but not without first identifying a distinct relation as the relation that grounds what matters. For example, one might attempt to establish that identity is not what matters by establishing that *biological continuity* matters. If biological continuity matters, then something matters, and once again, Stone's first premise is sacrificed.

Rejecting PC

Perhaps such difficulties are not insurmountable. If so, then Stone would still need to give us reason to accept the first two premises of his argument for EPI. Further, unlike Parfit's My Division argument, such evidence will have to be consistent with the claim that nothing matters. Stone must prove that identity is not what matters *directly*, without taking the detour through a relation distinct from identity. We will see that such a task is not easily accomplished.

Stone begins his defense of the first premise by contrasting two approaches to the diachronic problem of personal identity.

The *Psychological Criterion* (PC)- Personal identity consists in non-branching psychological continuity.

The *Bodily Criterion* (BC)- Human persons are identical to human animals.⁹

BC is what was earlier labeled *Animalism*, while PC is Parfit's theory of diachronic personal identity. Stone contends that BC is to be preferred to PC, *on the assumption* that Parfit is right about what matters (i.e. that psychological continuity, not identity, matters). Since this contention will ultimately provide support for Stone's first premise, it is important that Stone's reasons in favor of BC (on the assumption that psychological continuity matters) are compelling.

⁹ Stone, 175.

Why is Stone assuming, contra his own position that nothing matters, that psychological continuity *is* what matters?¹⁰ Although Stone is not terribly clear about the methodology, Stone appears to be offering a *reductio* of the view that psychological continuity is what matters. If Stone can show *both* that BC follows from the assumption that psychological continuity is what matters, and that BC entails that psychological continuity isn't what matters, then psychological continuity cannot be what matters. Thus, one of the most plausible Reductionist candidates for the relation that grounds what matters, if identity doesn't, is eliminated from contention. Let us now turn to Stone's arguments against PC.

Stone attempts to undercut what he believes to be the intuitive appeal of PC in the following passage.

As both criteria [PC and BC] coincide only partly with what matters, and as it's easy enough to express the facts once identity and connectedness are separated) so that the 'biologist' can say if I fall into a PVS, that I survive but lose what matters, while in Teletransportation I have what matters but I don't survive), PC's superiority in tacking what matters isn't a decisive advantage...the fact that PC apparently tracks what matters no longer suggests that it tracks identity.¹¹

¹⁰ Stone actually asks us to assume that it is psychological connectedness, not continuity, that matters. I do not believe this difference affects the arguments offered here.

¹¹ Stone, 176.

Stone here actually employs an Animalist maneuver (twice) hinted at by Eric Olson, and utilized by David Hershenov.¹² The fact that I wouldn't have prudential concern for the individual in a permanent vegetative state does not favor PC over BC given that identity is not what matters. Likewise, there might be cases of prudential concern absent identity. For example, one can explain intuitions supporting concern in Teletransportation in the same fashion that Olson and Hershenov attempt to explain intuitions regarding cerebrum transplantation; I am not the same person as the person who walks out of the Teletransporter on Mars, but I do have prudential concern for this individual. If identity is not what matters, the two facts are not explicitly inconsistent.

I will not *dwell* on the problems with this strategy here. Suffice it to say that Stone's attempt to utilize such a strategy encounters problems analogous to those faced by Olson and Hershenov. I will briefly state the problem. As noted above, the Animalist version of Parfit's My Division argument must be consistent with Animalism. Thus, I must be numerically identical to (i.e. the same animal as) Lefty absent Righty. So in the Animalism compatible version of Parfit's My Division argument, I am both psychologically and biologically continuous with Lefty and Righty. However, the Animalist cannot just assert that it is psychological continuity, not biological continuity, which matters. Parfit's argument is so forceful because I am related to Lefty and Righty in the same fashion that I am related to Lefty in the absence of Righty. And in latter case, what matters is preserved. Most importantly, no biological continuity is required to ensure that I am Lefty in the latter case. Parfit, given his account of personal identity, has the resources to separate psychological and biological continuity in order to establish that

¹² Olson, *The Human Animal* and David Hershenov, "Countering the Appeal of the Psychological Approach to Personal Identity", *Philosophy*.

psychological continuity, not identity, nor biological continuity, is what matters.

Unfortunately, it appears that the Animalist cannot effect such a separation.

Of course, we are supposed to be operating under the assumption that psychological connectedness *is* what matters. However, we have not seen a compelling argument for Parfit's conclusion that is compatible with BC (i.e. Animalism). Thus, we have *some* reason for thinking that BC and Parfit's conclusion are incompatible. If this is true, and if psychological connectedness/continuity is what matters, then BC is false. The falsity of BC, on the assumption that psychological connectedness/continuity is what matters, would be sufficient to stymie Stone's *reductio*.

Stone argues further that PC has "strongly counter-intuitive" consequences. It seems that for each of us, things could have gone slightly different. I might have been born a few minutes earlier. You might not have read this sentence. According to Stone, PC cannot fully accommodate our intuitions regarding the modal properties you and I possess. Let us concentrate upon the fact (and it does seem to be a fact) that I could have been born a few minutes earlier. Suppose this were to happen, and that my life unfolds exactly as it indeed will, except for the fact that everything occurs to me a few minutes earlier. Call the possible world in which this occurs *W2*, the actual world being *W1*. It is important that the time lag be enough so that "throughout my entire life all of my token mental-events were just different enough, either in content or in temporal location, to be numerically distinct from the tokens" I have in *W1*.¹³

According to Stone, it is easy for BC to accommodate the intuition that the person born earlier (Mr. A, following Stone) is I. Since the same animal is present in both scenarios, I am Mr. A. The objection raised by Stone is that if PC is correct, I cannot be

¹³ Stone, 176.

Mr. A, but I obviously am (since *I* could have been born slightly earlier), so PC is false. Why is it the case that I am not the same person as Mr. A? Stone elaborates.

A strongly counter-intuitive consequence of PC, however, is that Mr. A would not have been me. (Stone, 1987) For no stage of A's life is psychologically connected to any stage of mine. There are no causal relations whatsoever between events in his life and mine; for instance, neither of us remembers anything of the other's life.¹⁴

The argument appears to be that in order for Mr. A and I to be the same person (if PC is correct), Mr. A at some time and I at the present time must be psychologically continuous. Since "there are no causal relations whatsoever" that obtain between my mental events and Mr. A's mental events, the relation in which personal identity consists according to PC fails to obtain between Mr. A and myself; $I \neq \text{Mr. A}$. Hence, PC entails that I could not have been born slightly earlier.

One immediately worries about whether PC really is committed to the distinctness of Mr. A and myself. PC, given its status as a philosophical analysis of our identity over time, if true, is most surely necessarily true. Thus, within any world, if x at t and y at t are the same person, then x at t and y at t must be psychologically related. However, this is not what the objection requires. The objection assumes that the following is also a consequence of PC.

¹⁴ Stone, 177.

(PC!) $\forall x \forall y \forall t \forall t' \forall w \forall w'$ [x at t in w is the same person as y at t' in w' iff x at t in w is psychologically continuous with y at t' in w']

However, PC! does not follow from PC, at least not without adding additional premises.

If the defender of PC rejects PC!, then she can state that when we are examining counterfactual situations, no causal connection need obtain between myself and the individual that would have existed in order for this individual to be me.

Even if you don't find this response compelling, Stone's objection faces a further difficulty. Stone claims that BC delivers the verdict that I am Mr. A. But is this so? If Stone's reasoning about PC above were cogent, then the following would seem to be a consequence of BC.

(BC!) $\forall x \forall y \forall t \forall t' \forall w \forall w'$ [x at t in w = y at t' in w' iff x at t in w is the same animal as y at t' in w]

Additionally, consider a plausible analysis of 'same animal as' offered by Olson.¹⁵

(A'') A person x at t is identical to another thing y at t' if and only if the vital functions that y has at t' are causally continuous in the appropriate way with those x has at t and there does not exist another individual z at t' which is distinct from y whose vital functions are also causally continuous in the appropriate way with those x has at t.

¹⁵ Olson, *The Human Animal*.

We should not forget Stone's earlier assertion that no causal relations obtain between events in my life and events in Mr. A's. In addition to ruling out psychological continuity between Mr. A and I, it also seems to rule out the biological continuity noted in A''. If this type of biological continuity is a necessary condition for identity over time, which doesn't seem far-fetched if *BC* is correct, then I am not the same animal as Mr. A, thus I am not identical to Mr. A.

In support (defense) of *BC*, Stone addresses the Transplant argument discussed in detail last chapter. Here is Stone's version of the argument.

Suppose your cerebrum is destroyed; your body persists in a permanent vegetative state, sustained by your lower brain, until O.J. Simpson's cerebrum (not his entire brain, which would bring along the animal (Olson, 1997, 45)) is implanted in it. The resulting person is psychologically continuous with O.J., not you. He has O.J.'s apparent memories, his personality, and he acts on O.J.'s intentions. But that person is you, the person at the beginning of the story, according to *BC*. This is strongly counter-intuitive surely.¹⁶

Stone could, but doesn't, employ the Olson/Hershenov strategy discussed earlier. Instead, Stone argues that *BC* does not have the counter-intuitive consequence noted above. According to Stone, when my cerebrum is removed and replaced with O.J.'s cerebrum, a new brain comes into existence since "it seems reasonable that if one excises most of the brain's matter at a go and substitutes a chunk of new-brain cells, the result is

¹⁶ Stone, 178.

a numerically distinct brain.”¹⁷ I myself am not sure that this is so, but let us grant that this is so. How does this help the BC theorist? Well, Stone explains that if my brain goes, then the animal goes out of existence, and BC is thus not committed to identifying me with the Juice-like entity.

Unfortunately, Stone’s account of the persistence conditions of human brains and human animals is implausible for a few reasons. First, why think that destroying my brain, if this is how we should think of the situation, also destroys me? The lower parts of the original brain are still intact, functioning, and continuously supporting the vital functions noted in A’’. It thus isn’t at all clear that the animal with the original cerebrum is not the same animal as the animal with O.J.’s cerebrum. Stone also states that I could survive the procedure, as the recipient, if my original cerebrum is put into O.J.’s body. This is because most of my original brain’s matters has survived and is functioning properly. However, it is hard to view cerebrum transplants bringing along the animal for cerebrums have little to do with the life-sustaining functions so dear to BC theorists.¹⁸

Another troubling aspect of Stone’s theory arises when we ask what would happen if the procedure were bungled and my cerebrum eliminated and not replaced. Stone faces a dilemma here. Either he agrees that I do survive such a procedure or I do not. If I do, then where I end up will depend upon whether my original cerebrum is transplanted. If it is, then I go with it. If it isn’t, and I don’t receive a transplant, then I stay with my original body. If it isn’t, and I do receive a new transplant, then I no longer exist. Such exotic persistence conditions for human animals seem unlikely. Accepting

¹⁷ Stone, 178.

¹⁸ See also Olson, *The Human Animal*.

the other horn (that I do not survive) is also hard to justify given the presence of apparent biological continuity.

These difficulties do not refute BC, but both Stone's arguments against PC, and his defense of BC, do not establish that BC is the only theory of personal identity one can plausibly combine with Reductionism. I will not attempt to settle the matter here.

Suppose that it is granted that BC follows from Reductionism. What next?

Psychological Continuity and What Matters

Stone develops an argument intended to prove that psychological continuity/connectedness is not what matters. As noted above, this argument relies upon BC. In this section I will ignore the difficulty faced by Stone's EPI argument concerning Parfit's use of psychological continuity to establish that identity is not what matters. Let us grant that identity is not what matters, if Stone can prove that psychological continuity/connectedness is not what matters, then he has succeeded in eliminating one of the main candidates for the relation that does ground what matters. This would certainly help support his contention that if identity does not matter, then *nothing* matters.

Stone begins his argument by presenting a thought experiment. Imagine that you often experience severe, debilitating headaches. Your doctor tells you that the headaches are caused by a brain tumor that can be eliminated by a radiation device. Unfortunately, the device will scramble your brain, leaving you with "the mind of a newborn infant-

educable, but blank.”¹⁹ Fortunately, the device will record the exact state of your brain prior to radiation and will, three seconds later (post-radiation), reconfigure your brain to match its previous state. According to Stone,

When I wake up, I will be psychologically connected to myself as I was three seconds ago. I will resemble myself on account of a reliable cause and, though it isn't the normal cause, this is insufficient reason to conclude that I will lose what matters in survival.²⁰

Let us add a twist by stipulating that the procedure described above will be actualized if your doctor presses the A button. Additionally, if your doctor presses the B button, your tumor will be removed and reconfigured as well. The reconfiguration that results from pressing the B button is a configuration that was selected long ago. However,

On the Machine's computer's hard drive are instructions (a, b, c, d, ...) for rearranging cerebrum molecules to encode information for a personality which the computer generated randomly one year ago. ... By an extraordinary coincidence, that randomly generated personality is mine, down to the last detail.²¹

Thus, the reconfiguration that results from pressing button B is identical to the reconfiguration that results from pressing button A.

¹⁹ Stone, 179.

²⁰ Stone, 179.

²¹ Stone, 180.

We can now formulate Stone's argument that psychological connectedness/continuity does not matter. Stone finds it hard to imagine that the difference between pressing A and pressing B could have an effect upon whether or not what matters is preserved. Hence, Stone endorses the following principle,

(AB) If pressing button A preserves what matters, then pressing B preserves what matters.

On the assumption that AB is true, and that pressing A *does* preserve what matters, it follows that pressing B does as well. However, pressing B preserves what matters absent psychological connectedness/continuity. Given that we have a case of what matters without psychological connectedness/continuity, Stone concludes that psychological connectedness/continuity cannot be what matters. Stone himself offers a brief synopsis of his claim.

If identity isn't what matters in survival, I would be irrational to fear that B, not A, will be pressed. If B is pressed, the person who leaves the hospital will be responsible for my past misdeeds; and it's rational for me to anticipate his experiences. Since I have what matters without it, psychological connectedness isn't what matters in survival.²²

First, I will offer a few thoughts regarding Stone's employment of the AB principle. One might object that it is not psychological connectedness alone that matters,

²² Stone, 182.

but psychological connectedness accompanied by, not only a *reliable* cause, but the *normal* cause of such connectedness as well. If this is the correct view of what matters, then pressing button A does not preserve it what matters. Stone himself seems to share the intuition that psychological connectedness plus a reliable cause alone is not sufficient to guarantee that what matters is preserved. Consider Parfit's teletransportation case, a case involving psychological continuity with a reliable cause,

The scanner here on Earth will destroy my brain and body, while recording the exact state of my cells... Traveling at the speed of light, the message will take three minutes to reach the Replicator on Mars. This will then create, out of new matter, a brain and a body exactly like mine. It will be in this body that I shall wake up.²³

Stone states, and I concur, that he is afraid that he will "be murdered by the Scanner; somebody else will be created on Mars."²⁴ Granted that Stone, in the end, believes that nothing matters, so perhaps his intuition concerning teletransportation and what matters is not surprising. The point here is only that it isn't obvious that pressing A preserves what matters.

Perhaps the major flaw in Stone's reasoning is readily apparent. Recall the first premise of the EPI argument,

²³ Parfit, 199.

²⁴ Stone, 182.

(Premise One) If identity is not what matters in survival, then nothing matters in survival.

If Stone's reasoning above regarding the radiation scenario and what matters is sound, Premise One is false. The truth of one of the premises of his argument that psychological connectedness does not matter requires that pressing the B button (and the A button as well) *preserves* what matters. This is needed to separate what matters from psychological connectedness. The problem for Stone is that if pressing B preserves what matters, and if this follows from the fact that identity is not what matters in survival, then something matters in survival for what matters is preserved between you pre-operation and your post-operation self.²⁵ And obviously, if it is true that something matters, even if it isn't psychological connectedness/continuity, then it is false that nothing matters.

Stone can, of course, deny that what matters is preserved by pressing button A, and given his commitment to the position that nothing matters this would not be surprising, but this denial dooms his argument. If what matters isn't preserved by pressing button A, then the thought experiment no longer provides us with a case of what matters in the absence of psychological connectedness/continuity. Admittedly, this would prove that psychological continuity *alone* is not sufficient to preserve what matters. However, the position that psychological continuity *plus* normal cause preserves what matters is untouched.

Stone thus needs to provide us with a different reason to reject the view that psychological continuity plus normal cause preserves what matters. Since Parfit's My Division scenario seems to be the case that best supports the intuition that psychological

²⁵ Remember that Stone is assuming here that BC is the correct theory of diachronic personal identity.

continuity accompanied by normal cause preserves what matters, Stone offers a different analysis of the scenario. Stone thus offers an alternative explanation for the ‘products’ of my fission; an explanation that does not require that psychological continuity plus normal cause explains what matters.

That I’m [psychologically connected] to some future person is a constant in both Teletransportation and Division. As I don’t feel that in Teletransportation I have what matters, connectedness doesn’t explain why I *do* feel that I have it in Division. That’s explained by the intuition that I somehow survive Division (with divided mind and body, perhaps), which in turn is motivated by the apparent satisfaction of the sufficient condition for identity in normal cases.²⁶

There are several problems with this proposal. It seems extremely implausible to think that the fission products are spatially separated parts of a single human organism. The resulting ‘organisms’ can play tennis, chess, and even fight to the death. Stone contends that we can accommodate this intuition by conceiving of the fission products as distinct organisms, let us call them A and B, who now compose the pre-fission organism C. However, this proposal does nothing to *explain* how A and B could possibly compose a third organism. Furthermore, we can construct an argument that psychological connectedness/continuity plus normal cause is what matters consistent with Stone’s description of the scenario.²⁷ Suppose that A kills B. Presumably, C does not survive this since, given that A certainly survives the shooting, it would then follow that we have

²⁶ Stone, 184.

²⁷ I am ignoring for now that problems raised in Chapter Three.

coincident organisms. Suppose further that we told C of these events prior to the fission procedure. Wouldn't it be rational for C to anticipate the experiences of A after the killing, even though C is not the same person as A? If this is so, then what matters obtains between A after he kills B, and C prior to the fission procedure. Psychological continuity plus normal cause is certainly a candidate to explain this fact.

Additionally, Stone appeals to the intuition that identity *is* what matters to argue that some form of psychological continuity relation is not what matters. As we learned earlier, this type of reasoning undermines the first premise of the EPI argument. The lesson is clear. Stone cannot establish that nothing matters solely by eliminating all candidates other than identity. He must do so in a manner that is consistent with identity *not* mattering. We have seen that this is difficult, if not impossible, to do.