

# The Fission Argument for the Unimportance of Identity Cannot Be Correct

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## *Abstract*

Eric Olson has made an important addition to the discussion started by Parfit of the argument from the possibility of fission to the unimportance of personal identity. Olson's discussion is challenging. I want, more briefly, to highlight what is the most important consequence of it. This is that it is metaphysically impossible, impossible in the strongest sense, that any version of Parfit's argument from fission can yield his conclusion. Olson argues specifically that this is impossible if what he calls a 'capacious ontology' is assumed. I argue that it is a consequence of Parfit's reasoning that this is so even without the assumption of a capacious ontology.

*Keywords:* Fission, Identity, What matters, Parfit, Olson.

## 1. Introduction

Sometimes, occasionally, something new and important is added to a long-running philosophical debate. Eric Olson (2019) has made just such an addition to the discussion started by Parfit (1971) of the argument from the possibility of fission to the unimportance of personal identity.

But Olson's discussion is long, complex and challenging. I want, more briefly, to highlight what is the most important consequence of it—a consequence he does not actually draw out. This is that it is metaphysically impossible, impossible in the strongest sense, that any version of Parfit's argument from fission can yield his conclusion.

The reason for this is that any version of the argument:

- (a) has to appeal to the difference between two situations (i) one in which a single brain hemisphere is transplanted (with consequent transfer of psychology) and the other destroyed; and (ii) one in which two hemispheres of a brain are transplanted into distinct skulls (with consequent transfer of psychology)—the fission case, and

- (b) must assume (premise 1) that whilst identity is preserved in the first case there is no identity in the second, though (premise 2) everything *that matters* is preserved in the second case as in the first.

Of course, Parfit needs to justify the second premise, that everything in the single hemisphere transplant that matters is preserved in the fission case, as well as the first. He could just insist that only psychological continuity matters. But, as Olson notes, he does not want to do that. I think the best response Parfit has, at this point, is to appeal to our intuition when we think about the possibility *first-personally*: it seems that given a choice between a single hemisphere transplant and fission there is nothing to make it reasonable to choose the former. This seems a good reply (Shoemaker 1984: 119) to a demand for a justification of Parfit's second premise. So, the crux, which Olson is mainly concerned with, is whether the first premise, that identity is not preserved in the fission case though it is in the single hemisphere transplant, can be defended. My claim in what follows is that thinking through Olson's criticism we can see that it cannot be, even if a capacious ontology (as Olson calls it) is not assumed. Note that throughout when I say 'identity' I mean personal identity. A capacious ontologist might say that identity is preserved in fission, but not personal identity. That is, he might say that there is something, one and the same thing, present before the fission and afterwards, but that there is no person present before and after the fission. But that would be implausible, no one does say this and Olson sensibly ignores the possibility.

## 2. Why the Fission Argument Fails

I now go on to explain all this.

The focus of Olson's argument is, in fact, what he calls "the capacious ontology"—the ontology of a philosopher who thinks that every matter-filled region of space-time contains a material thing which exactly matches its boundaries (Olson 2019: 30). An example of this is the four-dimensional ontology of Lewis (1976) and Quine (1960), in which any shorter-lived thing coincident throughout its existence with a longer-lived one is a temporal part of the latter. But Olson uses the term more generally. He makes a convincing case that Parfit accepts the capacious ontology, though without ever arguing for it, but he notes that Parfit is silent on the Lewis–Quine ontology of temporal parts. He also draws attention to Shoemaker (Shoemaker 1984), who also seems committed to a capacious ontology, but vociferously rejects the Lewis–Quine ontology of temporal parts.

Olson then goes on to argue that the defender of the capacious ontology cannot employ Parfit's fission argument to establish the unimportance of identity, in the sense championed by Parfit (so, of course, by assuming the capacious ontology, Parfit has undermined his own argument).

His argument for this claim depends on a careful distinction between what Parfit is arguing for and the (uninteresting) claim he is not arguing for.

Parfit's actual claim Olson expresses as follows:

*Strong Unimportance of Identity*: What matters in survival is never identity, but only some sort of psychological continuity. Whenever someone has a special prudential reason to care about someone's future, it's not because anyone survives, but only because that future person is psychologically continuous with her.

He distinguishes this from:

*Weak Unimportance of Identity:* What matters in survival is always identity. Psychological *continuity* is practically important because it secures identity. Whenever someone has a special prudential reason to care about someone's future welfare, it is either because she is the person and thus survives or because someone coincident with her survives. But it is always because someone survives.

According to the weak claim, psychological continuity is not what ultimately matters. What does is identity. But what matters to a person about fission is not that he, the very same person, exists after the fission. What matters to him is that there is *a* person coincident with him before the fission who exists after the fission, and so persists as one and the same identical thing through the fission. The previously coincident person may or may not be psychologically continuous with himself as he was earlier. This is not important to a person about fission. What matters to such a person is only that someone coincident with him before exists after. This is not Parfit's claim. It is no one's claim. As Olson puts it, "strong unimportance of identity is a radical challenge to our ordinary thinking about value. The weaker claim is much less interesting. The most likely reaction to it is bafflement. It is unlikely to change our thinking".

But, as Olson explains, Parfit's actual thesis about the unimportance of identity cannot be supported by appeal to the fission argument if the capacious ontology is assumed. According to the capacious ontologist, it is metaphysically necessary that in a case of fission there is survival. So, a thought experiment separating the two factors that might ground what matters—the presence of identity on the one hand (as in the single hemisphere transplant case) and the presence of mere psychological continuity (as in the fission case)—is metaphysically impossible. Granted that nothing is present in the former that matters which is lacking in the latter, we cannot infer that identity is not something that matters since, according to the capacious ontology, there is identity in the latter too.

However, it is obvious that one can think that there is identity in the fission case, i.e., that one can think that someone who exists after the fission in that situation existed before, without endorsing the capacious ontology. One needs not believe that every filled space-time region contains an object which exactly fills it to believe this.

A plausible line of thought that yields the conclusion that if there is someone in the single brain-hemisphere transplant case who survives the transplant then someone who is present after fission in the fission case was there before the fission, goes as follows. First thought. A person cannot go out of existence unless something happens to him. But in the relevant sense something happens to a person only if he undergoes a non-relational change. Nothing thereby happened to Socrates when Theaetetus grew taller than him. Nothing thereby happens to a man when his long-separated wife dies—though he becomes a widower. Nothing happened to the Merry Men when evil Prince John had a sudden change of heart and pardoned them, and the next day, returning to his old ways, reversed the pardon—though the number of outlaws in Sherwood Forest went from 100 to 0 then back up to 100. That a person cannot go out of existence merely because of a relational change is a fact, a necessary fact, about persons. It is not a fact about things generally, it is not, for example, a fact about holes or indentations more

generally.<sup>1</sup> But it is a fact about lots of things other than people: dogs and trees and ships and computers and ashtrays. People are like dogs and trees etc., not like holes. The second thought is simply that if a person (or dog or tree etc.) does not go out of existence at some time in one situation, it cannot go out of existence at that time in any second situation in which nothing happens to it that does not happen to it in the first. This is just part of what it is to be a person or a dog etc.<sup>2</sup>

If this line of thought is accepted, then—even if the capacious ontology is rejected—it must be acknowledged that, in the fission case, there is necessarily someone who exists after the fission who existed before it, if there is a person with such a lifespan in the single hemisphere transplant case. So, we again secure, by Olson’s reasoning, that it is impossible for any version of the fission argument to secure Parfit’s conclusion, since no thought experiment separating the two factors that might ground what matters is metaphysically possible.

Of course, someone might resist the line of thought just described and insist that a mere relational change can bring a person’s existence to an end—persons *are* like holes (he then has to choose whether to say the same of dogs etc., or to accept that persons are unlike dogs). But, apart from a defender of the capacious ontology, who thinks things are constantly going out of existence without any non-relational change happening to them, who would want to say this? This is the line that must be taken by those who endorse a non-branching, no-rival or best candidate, account of personal identity. But those who endorse this are typically capacious ontologists—the most prominent defenders of such an account of personal identity being Parfit himself, and Shoemaker.

I conclude that reflection on Olson’s argument should lead to the position that Parfit’s fission argument necessarily fails to yield its conclusion. Maybe some other argument will do the job. But Parfit’s own additional argument, the argument from below, is much contested, and specifically, as Olson shows, requires the assumption of the capacious ontology and is thus inconsistent with the strong independence of what matters from identity that Parfit believes in. And I know of no other. So, I think that where we are at present is that there is no good reason to accept Parfit’s famous claim that identity does not matter.

#### References

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<sup>1</sup> One can bring a hole into existence by digging. So, a way to cause a hole to cease to exist is to fill it up. But one can also cause it to cease to exist by lowering the ground around it.

<sup>2</sup> This line of thought, of course, derives from Williams (1956–7) and is employed by him in Williams (1970). Noonan (2019: 140) attempts a formulation of the basic principle (as applicable to persons) that can be put as follows in the terminology of this paper: “If two events are parts of the history of a person in one situation they must also be parts of the history of a person in any second situation in which they, and all the events which are part of the history of the person in the first situation, remain present and differ in no non-relational way from the way they are in the first situation”. J.R.G. Williams (2013) gives a better formulation which can be put as follows: “If a spatio-temporal region is exactly occupied by a person any duplicate (intrinsically identical) region is exactly occupied by a person or is part of a region exactly occupied by a person”.

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