

Is What Matters Present in a Fission Scenario? A Conventionalist Response to Noonan

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Abstract

In a recent paper, Olson (2019) returned to Parfit's argument from the possibility of fission to the unimportance of identity to claim that it is inconsistent with Parfit's ontological commitments. Picking up Olson's claim, Noonan (2024) argues that one consequence of this is that Parfit's argument necessarily fails to yield its conclusion. Here I show that Noonan's ontological stance is similar to Parfit's in one significant sense, thus diminishing the scope of his claim. As a result, I hold that if we want to defend that personal identity is what matters, we should reject that what matters may be present in a fission scenario.

Keywords: Personal identity, Fission cases, Conventionalism, Derek Parfit, Eric Olson, Harold Noonan.

1. Introduction

Among the many contributions that Derek Parfit made to the debate on personal identity, his argument from the possibility of fission to the unimportance of identity stands out for its relevance (Parfit 1984: 253–266). Recently, Eric Olson revisited this argument, claiming it does not work if one accepts Parfit's ontology (Olson 2019). In this regard, Olson argues that Parfit's argument about the unimportance of identity lacks support.

In response, Harold Noonan argues that Olson's point leads to an important consequence: any version of the fission argument fails to yield the conclusion that personal identity does not matter, regardless of whether one accepts Parfit's ontology (Noonan 2024). Noonan contends that it is metaphysically impossible to have a fission case where the persons existing after the fission have what matters in survival but they are not the same as someone existing before the fission. Thus, he concludes there is no good reason to accept that personal identity does not matter.

Noonan's discussion is illuminating and thought-provoking. However, his ontological stance aligns more closely with Parfit's than he may realise. As a result,

the scope of his paper is more limited than he states. It only shows that the fission argument fails if one shares one ontological commitment with Parfit. In this regard, I argue that if we want to defend that personal identity is what matters, we should deny that what matters may be present in a fission scenario. I will aim to show this succinctly.

2. Parfit's Argument

We can begin by considering Parfit's argument, which can be outlined as follows:

(Premise 1). There are fission cases where a person a exists at t_1 and two persons b and c exist at a later time t_2 , such that both b and c would be the same person as a if the other one did not exist but, since b and c are not the same person, per the transitivity of identity, both cannot be the same person as a .

(Premise 2). In such fission cases, both b and c have what matters in survival regardless of whether they are the same person as a .

Therefore,

(Conclusion). Personal identity is not what matters in survival.

3. Noonan's Argument

Olson argues that Parfit cannot endorse his argument because Premise 1 contradicts his own ontological commitments (Olson 2019: 35–38). The details of Olson's criticism are complex, but we do not need them now.

What matters for our discussion is Noonan's interpretation of Olson's criticism. Noonan claims that Parfit's argument fails not only because Premise 1 is incompatible with his ontology, but because it violates two necessary facts about persons (Noonan 2024). These facts are related to what Noonan elsewhere calls "the only x and y principle" (Noonan 2019: 33). Here, I will refer to them as

The Non-Relationality Principle: A person can only cease to exist due to a non-relational change

and

The Comparative Principle: If a person would survive a given situation involving non-relational changes, they would survive in any other situation where the same non-relational changes occur.

If we accept these two principles, Premise 1 in Parfit's argument collapses. The existence of c cannot be the reason why b fails to be the same as a , and *vice versa*. Therefore, Noonan concludes that, in the absence of any convincing argument in its favour, "there is no good reason to accept Parfit's famous claim that identity does not matter" (Noonan 2024).

At first sight, Noonan's account seems compelling. His only explicit commitments are:

- (1) the Non-Relationality Principle,
- (2) the Comparative Principle,
- (3) the claim that personal identity is what matters; and
- (4) Premise 2 in Parfit's argument, which Noonan takes to be quite unproblematic.

However, although these four claims may seem intuitive, they place Noonan in a difficult position. First, they entail an awkward interpretation of fission scenarios that depletes all the intuitive appeal of his proposal. Second, they align Noonan more closely with Parfit's ontology than he likely intends, thus making Noonan's claim more modest than he believes.

Let us see what I mean.

4. The Main Ways to Account for Fission Cases

Let us start by examining why I think that Noonan's four explicit commitments lead to an awkward interpretation of fission cases. To do this, we first need to see that his commitments are incompatible with the main approaches used to explain these scenarios.

The main problem with fission cases lies in the transitivity of identity. If a person *a* has two continuers *b* and *c* such that both could be the same person as *a*, we have to face the fact that the continuers are obviously distinct from each other. But if they are distinct, they cannot both be the same person as *a*, as this would violate the transitivity of identity.

There are two main ways to deal with this problem. The first one consists in taking the possibility of fission as evidence that we are relying on a wrong account of our persistence. This is the approach that Williams championed (Williams 1957, 1970). As both *b* and *c* are distinct, and our criterion does not allow us to pick one as the right continuer, we must conclude that neither of them is the same person as *a*. Moreover, if neither of them is *a*, we should also conclude that even if they had been their sole continuer, they would have neither been *a* because the identity between two persons cannot depend on the existence of a third person. This is a consequence of the Non-Relationality and Comparative Principles above.

The second approach is based on rejecting the Non-Relationality and Comparative Principles. We could think that our criterion of personal identity is mostly right but incomplete. It has to be amended to resolve fission cases. In this regard, we could hold that both *b* and *c* would be *a* had the other one not existed, but since they both exist, none of them is *a*. Alternatively, we could say that even if *c* would have been *a* had *b* not existed, since *b* exists then they are *a*, as they are a better candidate than *c*. The former approach, known as the non-branching view, is favoured by Parfit among others. The latter approach, known as "the best candidate view", has its best-known supporter in Nozick (1981).

Noonan, however, cannot endorse either of these approaches without dropping one of his key commitments. Both views entail that either *b* or *c* (or both) would not be the same person as *a*. For Noonan, this means he would have to abandon either his belief (3) that personal identity is what matters or (4) that both *b* and *c* would have what matters. Since he explicitly endorses both claims, he cannot address fission scenarios in any of these ways.

5. Noonan's Way to Account for Fission Cases

There is a third way to approach fission scenarios that would let Noonan keep his four explicit commitments. One can hold that *b* and *c* are indeed distinct persons, but that they already existed before the fission. In this view, we must accept that at t_1 there were at least two persons who shared *a*'s body and mind. The fission scenario simply provided separate bodies and minds for each of them. Hence, we

can easily uphold both (3) that personal identity is what matters, and (4) that *b* and *c* have what matters. They have what matters because they have survived.

The acceptance of the possibility of two or more persons sharing one body and mind is what Noonan calls the Multiple Occupancy Thesis (Noonan 2019: 14–15). It is a position commonly associated with those who accept a four-dimensionalist view, like Lewis (1983). However, it can also be accepted by others who reject four-dimensionalism. For instance, Parfit probably did not endorse four-dimensionalism, but according to Olson, he is committed to the Multiple Occupancy Thesis (Olson 2019: 29). Similarly, it seems this thesis best characterises Noonan's position in his paper, as it is the only way he can consistently hold his four commitments.

However, while Noonan's four commitments may seem intuitively true, the Multiple Occupancy Thesis is quite the opposite. Few people would be willing to endorse a theory that entailed the Multiple Occupancy Thesis. In this regard, the intuitive appeal of Noonan's proposal appears to vanish.

Before we delve further into the problems of the Multiple Occupancy Thesis, there is a significant point I would like to make.

6. The Limited Scope of Noonan's Argument

At the end of section 3, I argued that Noonan's four explicit claims committed him to an ontological stance significantly similar to Parfit's. This similarity makes the scope of his paper more limited than he realizes. We are now in a position to see why.

In his paper, Olson claims that Parfit needs “*some sort of capacious ontology*” to hold that questions about personal identity are empty (Olson 2019: 28). Olson's discussion is quite detailed about what exactly Parfit needs in his ontological view to support his account. However, one of the most important pieces of that “*sort of capacious ontology*” is the Multiple Occupancy Thesis.

Olson shows that Parfit's argument ultimately conflicts with his ontological stance (Olson 2019: 35–38). If we accept the Multiple Occupancy Thesis, *b* and *c* must both exist before and after the fission. As a result, Parfit cannot claim that personal identity is not what matters because even if *b* and *c* have what matters, they are still the same person as someone who existed before the fission.

In this regard, we can see that Noonan's paper does not go much further than Olson's. He does not demonstrate that “*any version of the fission argument*” necessarily fails to prove that personal identity is not what matters. Rather, he only shows that the fission argument fails if we accept the Multiple Occupancy Thesis. Certainly, Parfit's capacious ontology is much more demanding than the Multiple Occupancy Thesis. Thus, Noonan's paper still has the value of extending Olson's conclusion. However, the reach of his claim is much more modest than he thinks, as it only applies to those who endorse the Multiple Occupancy Thesis.

Noonan might argue that we all should endorse the Multiple Occupancy Thesis. But what reasons could we have to do so?

7. Reasons to Endorse the Multiple Occupancy Thesis

The Multiple Occupancy Thesis is a highly contested claim. It is far from being an obvious truth about persons, and it is neither intuitive nor particularly plausible. In fact, it seems that there is only one reason why anyone would

endorse it: we would if it were entailed or necessitated by some other fact whose truth we wanted to preserve.

This seems to be the case with Parfit. As Olson convincingly shows, Parfit needs the Multiple Occupancy Thesis to sustain his claims about the emptiness of questions about personal identity (Olson 2019: 28–29). However, Parfit's claims are as contested and counterintuitive as the Multiple Occupancy Thesis. Thus, Noonan is not likely to find any additional support for his account in Parfit's view.

Four-dimensionalism may entail the Multiple Occupancy Thesis too (see Lewis 1983). However, I doubt that the decision to accept four-dimensionalism hinges on the debate on personal identity. It is likely to be the other way around. In this regard, Noonan may find some support for the Multiple Occupancy Thesis if he can convince us that we should endorse four-dimensionalism as a general ontological framework. In any case, if he would like to do so, I think the ball is in his court.

That leaves us with the only reason that Noonan gives to support the Multiple Occupancy Thesis: he presents it as if it were an entailment of the Non-Relationality and Comparative Principles. Furthermore, he argues that these principles are necessary facts about persons. Thus, Noonan claims, it is necessarily true that *b* and *c* already existed before fission. And that can only be true if the Multiple Occupancy Thesis is true as well.

However, the Multiple Occupancy Thesis does not follow from the Non-Relationality or the Comparative Principles. In fact, these claims are irrelevant to the issue at hand. We can see evidence of it in Williams' reasoning. When addressing fission scenarios, Williams relies on the Non-Relationality Principle to argue that any account of our persistence that entailed that *b* and *c* would be the same person as *a* had the other one not existed must be wrong, as any other conclusion would be absurd. Then he goes on and, relying on the Comparative Claim, concludes that any such account of our persistence must be wrong in non-fission scenarios too (Williams 1957: 239; 1970: 178). Williams avoids the conclusion that the Multiple Occupancy Thesis is necessary, despite endorsing both the Non-Relationality and Comparative Principles.

What really forces Noonan to accept the Multiple Occupancy Thesis are his other two explicit commitments: (3) that personal identity is what matters, and (4) that in fission scenarios both *b* and *c* have what matters. If these two claims are true, then *b* and *c* must be identical to someone existing before the fission. But since they are clearly distinct persons after the fission, they must have been distinct persons before the fission as well. And this can only be possible if one accepts the Multiple Occupancy Thesis. Whether one also holds the Non-Relationality or the Comparative Principles does not affect this conclusion.¹

In sum, the acceptance of the Multiple Occupancy Thesis does not depend on whether we accept the Non-Relationality and Comparative Principles. Instead, it hinges on whether we think (3) that personal identity is what matters;

¹ This does not mean that accepting the Non-Relationality and Comparative Principles does not have consequences for fission cases. If Noonan denied them, he should claim that before the fission there were two persons sharing *a*'s body and mind, both of which survived. As he accepts it, then he must accept that before the fission there were three persons, one of them died and the other two survived. In any case, this does not affect Noonan's commitment to the Multiple Occupancy Thesis (see Noonan 2019: Ch. 12).

and (4) that both *b* and *c* have what matters. Either way, if one rejects the Multiple Occupancy thesis, Parfit's argument remains viable.

8. The Real Choice About Fission Cases

At this point, we may interpret fission cases as revealing a conflict between the claims (3) that personal identity is what matters and (4) that both *b* and *c* have what matters. One can endorse (3) and reject (4), as Williams does. Alternatively, we may side with Parfit and accept (4) while rejecting (3). Or we could stick with Noonan and accept both (3) and (4).

We should remember that the whole debate stems from Parfit's argument against (3). Thus, if we wish to preserve the intuition that personal identity is what matters, we are left with two choices. We may either accept or reject (4).

Noonan argues that we should accept (4). However, as we have seen, this commits him to hold the Multiple Occupancy Thesis too. As this cannot be seen as a desirable outcome, the rationale behind Noonan's acceptance of (4) should be especially compelling.

Unfortunately for Noonan, his justification falls short. He relies on Shoemaker and argues that, first-personally, "given a choice between a single hemisphere transplant and fission there is nothing to make it reasonable to choose the former" (Shoemaker 1984: 119–120). However, I can easily think of numerous reasons to choose the former.

From my first-person perspective, many things matter to me in my survival, and it's unclear whether a fission scenario could provide these to both of my continuers. For example, going on vacation with my wife; enjoying quality time with my kids; getting the satisfaction of being congratulated by my students after a challenging course; blending anonymously in the city to have some time for myself... Would both of my continuers be able to enjoy any of these things if I underwent fission? What would my family think of them? Would we all live together in the same house? And who, if anyone, would get to keep my current position at my university? Would they pay one of us, both, or would they resolve my contract and hire someone new? Would I be all over the news thus making it impossible to take a walk without being constantly asked to take a selfie with someone? I am not claiming that fission would outright prevent my continuers from having what matters to me, but I do argue that it is far from clear whether it would.²

The debate here is complex and would merit much more space than I have left. As I have noted elsewhere, the notion of "what matters" lacks sufficient philosophical precision. Thus, it is difficult to know whether what matters would be present in any given scenario (see Muñoz-Corcuera 2023). Nonetheless, I think that what I have said at least supports the following conclusion: Claim (4) is not obviously true and has the highly undesirable consequence of committing us to the Multiple Occupancy Thesis. Thus, if we want to claim that personal identity

² One could think that all these difficulties could be imagined away if, for example, one of my continuers were transported to Australia, while the other one remained at home. However, while this could grant what matters to my stay-at-home continuer, my Australian counterpart would not be capable of enjoying any of those things. And what I am trying to dispute here is that a fission scenario could grant what matters to both of my continuers at the same time. I am thankful to one anonymous referee for making me think about this.

is what matters in survival, we would be better off siding with Williams and asserting that, in fission scenarios, *b* and *c* would not have what matters.

9. A Final Thought

Even though the Non-Relationality and Comparative Principles do not affect the Multiple Occupancy Thesis, they are still substantive claims that can make a difference in debates about the persistence of persons. One such difference lies in how we could defend that personal identity is what matters.

Noonan would probably want to hold both the Non-Relationality and Comparative Principles, as he takes them to be necessary facts about persons. In this regard, he would probably argue that if personal identity were to depend on relational properties, it would lose its significance. If I could cease to exist simply because someone else exists, then personal identity could not be considered of much importance.

On the contrary, I think that rejecting the Non-Relationality and Comparative Principles is perfectly compatible with the view that personal identity is what matters. Conventionalist accounts, which give social properties a significant role in personal identity, are a good example (see e.g. Braddon-Mitchell & Miller 2004; Wagner 2019, and Muñoz-Corcuera 2021). For instance, according to Schechtman (2014), a person is an entity defined by a cluster of biological, psychological and social properties. As such, persons persist over time as long as enough of these properties still hold together.

In fission cases usually biological and psychological continuity are disrupted significantly. A person may survive such disruption if their social properties remain unaltered. However, in fission cases, social properties would likely be affected as well. Hence, the mere existence of two continuers instead of one, combined with the diminished degree of biological and/or psychological continuity, may cause a person to cease to exist (Schechtman 2014: 159–166).

This view rejects both the Non-Relationality and Comparative Principles. However, it does not entail that personal identity does not matter. It only would if it entailed a rejection of another principle which, like the Non-Relationality and Comparative Principles, traces back to Williams' work on personal identity:

The Non-Arbitrariness Principle: An arbitrary convention cannot cause a person to cease to exist.

As Williams pointed out, if personal identity depended on arbitrary conventions, it could not bear the ethical significance that we attribute to it (Williams 1970: 178–179). Williams thought that the mere existence of a third person was a trivial fact that could only affect personal identity if we relied on such arbitrary conventions. The non-branching and closest continuer views seemed to justify his opinion.

However, conventionalism does not treat the mere existence of a third person as a trivial fact. Instead, it views this as a significant factor, because it disrupts the continuity required for the post-fission persons to live the same life as the original person (Schechtman 2014: 166). In this regard, conventionalism does not make personal identity depend on arbitrary conventions, but on non-arbitrary ones. And a non-arbitrary convention can carry ethical significance and support the claim that personal identity is what matters (for a discussion, see Muñoz-Corcuera 2021: 732–737).

Again, there is much room for debate here. However, I do not have space to fully address this issue which surely merits further thought.

10. Conclusion

Noonan claimed that Parfit's argument from the possibility of fission to the unimportance of identity necessarily failed to yield its conclusion, as its first premise was false. However, we have seen that Noonan's ontological stance diminishes the scope of his claim. Parfit's argument only fails if one accepts the Multiple Occupancy Thesis. And this thesis is far from being an uncontroversial or widely accepted view.

As a result, I have argued that if we aim to defend that personal identity is what matters, it would be more fruitful to focus on the second premise of Parfit's argument. Namely, that what matters would be preserved in a fission scenario. This is difficult to do at the moment, as the notion of what matters remains philosophically imprecise. I have suggested that conventionalist accounts of personal identity might be of help here. In any case, there is still much to be discussed.³

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