



Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

My Beginnings

Other

How to cite:

Belshaw, Christopher (2007). My Beginnings. Not Set.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [\[not recorded\]](#)

Version: [\[not recorded\]](#)

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Copyright c 2007,

THE MONIST: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical
Inquiry. Peru, Illinois, USA 61354

MY BEGINNINGS

Could I have had different parents? In practice, no, but in principle, yes. And could I have been born at a different time? Again, in practice no, but in principle, yes. These are, perhaps, common sense verdicts on such questions. But they go against what may be seen as some prevailing philosophical orthodoxies. I defend versions of the common sense verdicts, and argue against the orthodoxies, here. These arguments are neither technical nor particularly complex. What I want to suggest here is that these rather ordinary questions are best answered by rather ordinary means.¹

I

Start with timing. Lucretius, in support of the Epicurean view about death, notes an asymmetry in our attitudes to non-existence. On the face of it there are two ways of extending life, either by dying later, or by being born earlier. And yet for the most part we fuss only about the one. Why is this?

The puzzle here has excited some recent debate, and a number of responses. One has it that although we could indeed have been born earlier this is just of no interest to us – we're generally indifferent to the past, and care only for the present and the future. So life still to come, and its ending, is what matters to us, while life behind us, and the more of that we could have had, is of no concern.² Whether or not it works here, a notable feature of this approach is to distinguish between what is possible for us, and what in fact we care about. A more familiar approach is to address issues about possibility head on – we could die later, but we couldn't have been born earlier. This can indeed seem right. It seems clear that death, on many occasions, need not have occurred, and that had it not occurred, the very same person would have lived on. But how could I, this very person, have been born earlier? Surely someone born earlier would have been someone else. And so an earlier birth isn't, in fact, any real possibility for me.

There is widespread support for such a view. And much of this support derives from views about the necessity of origin. Take Parfit's position. He insists that as a

matter of fact, none of us could have been conceived much earlier or later than the time when we were actually conceived.³ And this because if that time is altered by as much as a month, a different sperm and a different egg will be involved. Given this wholesale exchange of the originating material then, inevitably, a different person will come into existence. So even though I could fairly clearly have been born a few days earlier or later, and arguably could as well have been conceived a few days earlier or later, my beginnings are otherwise fixed. Notice that the argument here pulls together both questions with which I began. Insisting on the necessity of originating material fixes both our parents, and the time at which we are born.

The argument is plainly defective, however. There is just no reason, on the grounds given here, for thinking that we could not have been conceived at a substantially different time. Both sperm and egg can be frozen, and their union delayed. And we could of course have been born at a different time. For the embryo itself can be frozen, and its development delayed. Nor is there a way out in noting here Parfit's caution, and his insistence on what is in fact true, rather than what is necessarily true. He clearly thinks that even if it is logically possible for someone to be conceived much later than they were, this isn't physically possible. But it is. And it is physically possible, too, for someone to be born much later than they were. The requisite technologies haven't been around for long. People born a hundred years ago couldn't, as things stand, have been frozen as embryos, and born later. But things could have stood differently. The technologies could have been developed earlier. That too is physically possible. And earlier births, earlier conceptions are similarly possible. There may well be people born in 2150 who, had materials not been frozen, would have been born in 2050. So reliance on origin claims, where the question of timing is concerned, isn't going to work. We'll need to look elsewhere.

II

Many people think it's clear that none of us could have been born at a substantially different time. Someone born a hundred years earlier, whatever the history of their originating material, would, they say, have been a different person, someone else, not me. I think this is right. And, as a friend of the psychological account of personal identity, I argue thus: psychological continuity and connectedness matter to identity – if there are abrupt and extreme changes here, then identity is forfeited. A strange thing happens one night. My physical form is unchanged while mentally things are

altogether different, with, or so it appears, near total amnesia, and a wholly different character and dispositions. Suppose too that there's an antipathy to my real name, and the person here insists on being known as Bill. And so it remains until death. My death, or Bill's? The alterations here are sudden and profound. And arguably the best way to describe what happens is to acknowledge that I cease to exist when they occur, and that Bill dies later, when the body we shared gives out.

Suppose a mid-life change is in this way identity destroying. Then, surely, development from the outset along radically different lines is identity denying. Suppose, as I believe, and evidence from twins notwithstanding, that much of my psychological life is a product of environment, rather than nature. I have just the one brother. As a one day old baby my brother's brother is given for adoption to a Japanese family. This child eats fish, speaks Japanese, wrestles sumo. I want to say that if this had happened then I would never have existed.⁴ Consider not place, but time. Cryonics works. As a new born baby my brother's brother is taken from his parents, frozen for two hundred years, with life to be continued late in the 22nd century. Again, I wouldn't exist, were this to be true.

What I want to insist on in such cases, then, is that material identity is in no way sufficient for personal identity. A particular human body can, serially, be the habitat of different people. And particular hunks of originating material – separately the sperm and egg, or together the embryo – can develop into different people. But more important than noting the claims here is to note that my argument with those taking a contrary view is, as I understand it, far from deep. We'll agree, surely, about at least almost all the facts involved – in the first case, about the persistence of the human body, the degree of psychological difference over the change, the attitudes and reactions of those involved; in the second, about the variant histories for the same originating material, the profound differences between the emerging psychologies, and again the concerns that most of us have for the persistence (more or less, and allowing for gradual change) of the psychologies we have now. And we'll agree, too, about the range of opinions aired on the identity questions in such cases, with some saying, as I do, that different, others that the same, people are involved. Still this is agreement about almost, and so not yet all the facts because we still disagree, apparently, on which of these opinions are correct, and so disagree about the facts of identity.

But is this right? Certainly we might imagine such facts – facts about the unchanging spirit or soul or essence of the person involved, something perhaps temporarily veiled, emerging in an afterlife. Yet I doubt their existence. And relatively few of those arguing with me will rest their case on alleged facts like these. If that were the issue, then disagreement between me and my opponents would be both straightforward and profound. Others may think there are some sorts of metaphysical facts, perhaps even more obscure, less accessible, than these alleged spiritual facts, and that identity questions rest on these. But here it isn't so much ordinary doubt as an inability, on my part, even to comprehend what sorts of things these metaphysical facts would be. Setting this aside, what are we left with? Either no facts at all, or facts of a non-standard, even if not unfamiliar kind. I think it's the latter. What I want to suggest then, is that there is defensible disagreement here, and that it centres on what best to say about some non-standard or puzzling situation in which matters of identity are involved. And - and this is why the need for technicalities is thin – what best to say is in large part decided not by abstruse metaphysical speculation but rather by attending to what reasonably informed people do and will say. Get the ordinary level facts right, think through at least their immediate implications, take account of our related interests and concerns, and then see whether some sort of consensus might emerge.⁵

So it isn't appropriate here simply to duck the issue, and deny that there are any facts at all where such questions are concerned. This might appear an option. It could be said that in these circumstances the same body continues, the same material develops, but that the personalities involved are effectively distinct. Certainly we can agree thus far. But can we agree that that is the end of the matter? It seems to me that the ordinary questions, Will I survive? Would I have been born? cannot in this way be sidestepped. Such questions get asked, and because our concerns are so much, and so understandably, focussed on psychology, their best answers, in the sorts of cases outlined here are, or so I believe, no. And this answer is tempered, or provisional, just because if, as I maintain, it hangs on the direction of ordinary conversation then there is no special authority attaching here to philosophical expertise.

There is a further point to be made here. It might be objected that on the psychological account of personal identity none of us ever born. Rather, we come into existence some time after birth. And so there is simply no question of our being born at a different time. But there are two components to a reply. First, – and this is line

with the comments above – I don't claim that there are, as well as human organisms, some distinct non-physical entities, persons, and that we are these persons. For that would be, apparently, a substantive and controversial claim, and one clearly at odds with ordinary views.⁶ All I claim is that everyday references to ourselves and to others typically foreground psychology – on such arcane matters as to whether 'person' is a substance or phase sortal everyday views are, and defensibly, silent.⁷ Second, even were I to claim this, the substance of my view here would be unscathed. For even if persons are distinct from their bodies, the relation is such that if the body were to be born at a substantially different time, then a different person would (although somewhat later) begin to exist. Born or not, I couldn't have come into existence at a substantially different time.

III

Kripke's claims about the necessity of origin are well known. So too is the rhetoric. Could this woman have been a swan? Could this very table, this wooden lectern, (banging, no doubt, on the lectern at the time) have been made of ice? Who could think, who could dare, so absurd a thing? Of course she couldn't have been a swan. And of course this table and a table made of ice could hardly be one and the same. Our intuitions about such cases are robust.

The claims here differ from Parfit's in two respects. The principle they allude to – 'If a material object has its origin from a certain hunk of matter, it could not have had its origin in any other matter'⁸ - is perfectly general, applying to things as well as to people. And they deal with what is strongly necessary, rather than what must in fact be the case. Given this generality, this ambition, the principle is hardly uncontroversial, and its consonance with everyday opinion hardly thoroughgoing. Not only could the table not have been made of ice, but, according to Kripke, it couldn't have been made of a different hunk of wood.⁹ Suppose that it's made, not from planks, but from fibreboard. It couldn't have been made from different sheets. Or consider a vase, and its origin in a particular ball of clay. The potter's assistant prepares balls of clay, and has them ready in a bin. He's asked for a ball, and takes one, more or less at random. But the vase the potter makes depends on just which ball he's given. A different ball, and it's a different vase. Many will find such claims hard to believe.

What makes for the difference between the persuasive and the less persuasive cases? In the former the proposed changes in originating material will generate substantial differences further on. A swan woman, an ice table, will be significantly different from women and tables of a more familiar kind.¹⁰ There may well be differences in numerical identity, but there are certainly differences in qualitative identity in instances like these. But with a different block of wood, a different ball of clay, these qualitative differences are negligible, to say the least. And it isn't immediately easy to see why, when everything that matters to us remains the same, we should accept that we are, in these circumstances, faced with a different thing.

These concerns about the origin principle derive from everyday intuitions about identity. Another challenge comes from philosophical speculation. The sceptic sometimes has it that, for all we know, the world might have popped into existence five minutes ago. I think I have this substantial history, but I could be wrong. Yet if the origin principle is right then this way of putting things is at best misleading. If the world came into existence five minutes ago then hardly any of the stuff that I think exists really does exist. Other stuff, with different origins, exists in its place. And of course this goes for me too. I am not the person I think I am. This isn't just a figure of speech – it isn't simply the overturning of some contingent fact about me. Rather, as we're dealing here with necessities, then not having these beginnings, this history, makes for a real difference in identity. And this may seem an unpalatable consequence of the origin principle.

Persuasive and palatable or not, Kripke's principle may nevertheless be true. Is it? Before deciding, consider, and guard against, a pair of possible confusions.

Distinguish, first, between concerns with a thing's beginnings or origins, and with developments or changes it may, later in the course of its history, undergo. The question isn't whether the queen could turn into a swan, or have gone through a swan stage at some earlier period. Similarly.. '...the question of whether the table could have *changed* into ice is irrelevant here. The question whether the table could *originally* have been made of anything other than wood is relevant'.¹¹

The distinction between these questions is reasonably straightforward. Nevertheless I want to say a bit more about it.

While there are many believers in the necessity of origin, no one believes in a corresponding necessity regarding change. No one thinks that change is impossible. And no one thinks that if an object changes in any respect it becomes *ipso facto* a

different thing. A thing's origin may well be fixed, but its later development is to some degree open. But now about these later changes we can ask two sorts of questions. First, what sorts, and degree of change are possible? And (here only to sketch an account) we might want to consider limitations on change imposed by technology, by physics, or by logic. Could the queen turn into a swan? We don't have the equipment, but it may be physically possible, and certainly logic won't prevent it. Second, which of these possible changes are identity threatening? And in the present context this question has two parts, concerning both individuals, and kinds. So one question is, if a such and such changes in this or that way, would it still be a such and such? Another is, if this particular such and such changes in this or that way would it still be this particular such and such? Suppose the queen turns, magically, into a swan or, less magically, into a pile of ash. I take it that if this happens she ceases to exist. A swan, even more ash, is neither a person nor this particular person, the queen.¹² But if the wood changes to ice there is still a table in existence. And we may well want to say it's the same table. We may well decide, that is, that being made of wood isn't among the table's essential properties.¹³

The questions here differ in an important respect. Those focussing on change are, in principle at least, easy enough to answer, limited only by our grasp of the relevant scientific or technological facts, or some basic logical principles. But questions of identity are clearly much less straightforward, and their answers given neither by ordinary appeal to material facts, or by appeal to more or less transparent notion of what is logically possible, or logically necessary. As before, I want to deny that there are any complex metaphysical issues in play here, and to suggest instead that what, reflectively, we do say determines what we should say. Often this is straightforward – a pile of ash is not a queen. Often, too, there is nothing we do say, nothing that strikes us as right to say, and so nothing in particular that we should say. But in other cases contrasting intuitions are brought into play, and there's often benefit to be had, progress to be made in teasing these out and aiming at a stable and shared position.¹⁴

A further point to bring out here is a respect in which Kripke's position is seemingly more reticent and reserved than Parfit's. His origin principle makes no claim about sufficiency – it says only that particulars couldn't have different origins, not that originating materials must develop into these particulars. And this is surely right. The clay might have remained in the bin, the plank might have been used for

firewood, and the sperm and egg might never have been introduced. But Parfit, in contrast, wants to articulate and employ the notion of a distinctive necessary property, as one that a given person couldn't have lacked, and that only that person could have had. And on his version of the origin principle, 'each person has this distinctive necessary property, that of having grown from the particular pair of cells from which this person in fact grew'.¹⁵ This isn't a sufficiency claim but it is something close, implying not that I had to develop from my embryo, but that if anyone developed from the embryo, that person would be me. This claim needs amending, as is widely recognised, to deal with the case of twins, but that apart is it plausible? Parfit appears to think so, and Kripke seems in some places to agree.¹⁶ But the claim has no plausibility for most physical objects – even if the clay is used to make a vase, it seems clear it could make a number of different vases – and is less than clearly plausible even for human beings. Grant that I am not identical with the originating material, and grant that this material could encounter various vicissitudes, both natural and artificial, during its early days, there seems no reason to suppose that from it, only one person could result.¹⁷ Reservations about Parfit's claim here need to be distinguished from the point made above about different psychologies. It's one thing to think if that if the body remains the same, or develops in strongly similar ways, then in spite of psychological differences, the person remains the same. It's another to think that however both the body and mind develop, the person remains the same. I reject both views, but the first is the more defensible.

IV

What is disallowed, on the Kripkean view, is that the queen should have started out not as a royal sperm and egg, but as some swan. Anything starting as a swan, however queenly it later becomes, would not be this woman. What is allowed, however, is that soon after her birth the queen should have magically turned into a swan, and then remained a swan until the middle of last week, or even later, before becoming the queen again.¹⁸ That represents a possible history, even if only a logically possible history, of this woman. And now someone might wonder how this difference in timing can be so critical. Why hang so much on those first moments? And why, beyond those cases where it seems intuitively plausible, accept this origin principle? Doubly tentative, Kripke maintains that it is 'perhaps susceptible of something like a proof':

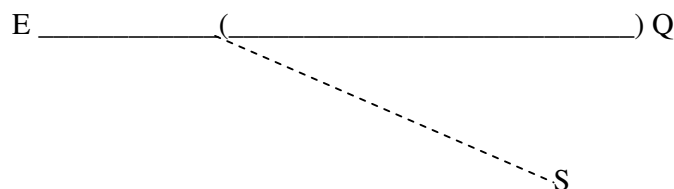
Let 'B' be a name (rigid designator) of a table, let 'A' name the piece of wood from which it actually came. Let 'C' name another piece of wood. Then suppose B were made from A, as in the actual world, but also another table D were simultaneously made from C.... Now in this situation $B \neq D$; hence, even if D were made by itself, and no table were made from A, D would not be B.¹⁹

This is certainly compressed, but the gist isn't too hard to discern.

Someone opposed to the origin principle suggests that our table, although in fact made from A, could as easily have been made from C. But then if that's even half way right, the objection goes, we can surely imagine a situation where there are two tables, effectively indistinguishable, made from the two pieces of wood. Suppose this, and we're supposing our original table to exist, with, alongside it, a duplicate table.²⁰ These tables, though (virtually) qualitatively identical are numerically distinct. They're different tables. But then suppose that only the duplicate is made. Whatever it looks like, whatever bill it fits, it's still not the original table. That, in this situation, remains unmade.

Focus on this argument, and it becomes clearer, I think, why the two cases – starting as a swan, becoming a swan – which above I suggested might seem similar are in fact importantly different. Standardly, in considering whether something might have had, at some stage, a different history we trace back the actual history of that thing to a certain point, and then consider divergences, thus:

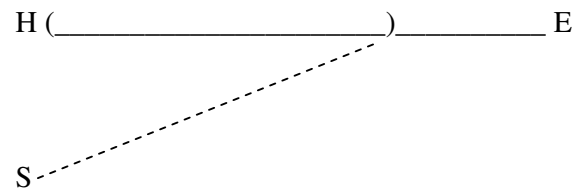
(I)



Here the solid line represents an object's history in the actual world, the dotted line an alternative and merely possible history.²¹ The bracketed section of the solid line represents that part of the object's actual history that won't occur, should the branching take place. Given that there is no question that some sorts of change are possible, the issue here is whether the resulting object should best be described as the same or different, as a development for the same object, or as its transformation into a different kind of thing, or a different individual. And it may be, of course, that for

some part of its history the object represented by the dotted line still is the same object as that on the solid, while at a later stage its identity, as we will say, changes. So suppose the questions here are whether Elizabeth, who in the actual world remains queenly, first, could instead have become swanlike and, second, whether that swanlike creature would have been her, Elizabeth, or something else. But then questions about origins seem not to be like this. Here we're asking whether this actual object, say with all its current features intact, could have started its existence from a different, and somewhat differently featured, lump of stuff. So, utilising the convention above, the question is whether Elizabeth, who actually developed from human material, could instead have developed from swan material. Supporters of the origin principle think that the most you might get from swan material, even when the human material is unused, is a replica of Elizabeth, and not Elizabeth herself. They think, then, that in contrast to (I) the situation pictured in (II) doesn't represent any genuinely coherent possibility.

(II)



There is, however, a puzzle here. Represented thus, the situations considered here do look to be symmetrical, with the origins issue the mirror image of that concerning development. And as branching out is possible, so too is closing in. But there seem to be factors counting against this. There's the direction of time to take into account, and the effects that might introduce. Perhaps coming together is harder than coming apart. There are the widespread differences in intuition about these cases. For certainly most people find the idea that things might have different origins much more puzzling than they might later develop in different ways. A thought here might be that as in (II) there are clearly two distinct lumps of material, the most we can get, from the second lump, is a replica of the target object. But in (I) there's only the one lump and questions only as to how it might change. And then connected with this there's Kripke's 'something like a proof' urging us to hold the replica or duplicate view, as against the possibility of different origins for the one thing supposedly pictured in (II).

Nevertheless, the symmetry of structure here remains notable, and it surely isn't yet clear enough why we should accept the origin principle.

V

My focus is on persons. And there are striking similarities between Kripke's argument here, and one used by Bernard Williams against the psychological criterion of personal identity. Charles claims, suddenly, to be Guy Fawkes, knows a lot about the 17th century, acts like a Catholic and a plotter. Has he become Guy? Williams points out that if this can happen to one person, it can happen to two. Suppose it does. Robert makes a similar claim, and is similarly plausible. As these two are manifestly non-identical, so they can't both be Guy. But there are no reasons to favour the claims of one over the other. The best thing, then, is to reject both claims, and to maintain the familiar view - bodily continuity is necessary for identity.²²

Yet it's objected that the situation Williams asks us to entertain doesn't exist. There aren't two claimants – just the one. So there's no clear reason to prevent Charles' claim from going through. Williams counters that Robert's making his case brings about no alteration in Charles' relation to Guy, and so has no bearing on the force of his claim. And so the fact that there could be two equally good candidates is enough to dismiss the claims of the actual one.

Something like this is going on in Kripke's argument. Here too the possibility of duplicates or multiples undermines the case for variant origins even when only one item – table, vase, person – will be actual. And here too a disagreement about identity – should we stress body or psychology, should we stress origins or qualities? – is resolved in favour of the more material of the two views. Of course there are differences between the cases – Williams' concerns the relations between individuals, whereas Kripke's focuses on individuals and their origins. Further (and I return to this below) Charles and Robert make equally strong claims to be Guy – and hence the failure of both, whereas when there are two tables their claims to be the original table B can easily be ranked – and hence the failure of the duplicate. Yet in spite of these differences the similarities are pronounced enough to suggest that linking them might bring gains.

Both Williams and Kripke want to insist on the distinction between (near) exact similarity and identity. They might both be happy with Parfit's comment here, '...exact similarity is not numerical identity, as is shown by any two exactly similar things'.²³ But while it's clear that Charles and Robert, no matter how similar, are numerically distinct, and clear too that in a situation involving pairs of tables the second is not the first, it is less clear, surely, either that Charles hasn't become Guy, or that the second table, that made from C, isn't the first, when only the one man, or the one table, exists.²⁴ And something like Nozick's closest continuer account of identity can be brought to bear on both cases – Charles becomes Guy, at least when his claim is both strong and unchallenged by duplicates,²⁵ and the table made from C is B, in the situation where it strongly resembles B and block A is unused. What such a move requires, of course, is that we remain unimpressed by the underlying claim here – explicit elsewhere in Williams,²⁶ only implicit in Kripke – that identity rests upon intrinsic features alone. For in both cases, clearly, the identity claim would be abandoned, were a compelling rival to appear. But we should remain unimpressed. For it isn't an intrinsic feature of anything that it is unique. And so if identity over time depends on the absence of duplicates, and at the same time on intrinsic features alone, there is no such identity.²⁷ But surely there is such identity, and once again I want to suggest that it obtains just when reasonably informed people say it obtains. And it's unsurprising, surely, that what they say here will vary with the existence of duplicate and near-duplicate candidates, and so unsurprising that something like Nozick's account is correct.²⁸

That said, there remains a stronger objection to Kripke's argument that, although hinted at, still needs to be made explicit. The question he asks is whether a particular thing could have had different origins, and not whether one thing might somehow be another, different, thing. It is, then, the question of whether table B might have been made from either A or C, and not whether table D might somehow be table B when block A is unused.²⁹ Imagine – and this is something the 'proof' doesn't rule out – that B and D are qualitatively very different tables. Now clearly D isn't B when piece A is unused, and nothing looking like B exists. But in considering whether B might have been made not from A but C we need to consider worlds where C is differently used, and used in such a way as to render plausible the suggestion that it's been made into B. The difference between Williams' and Kripke's arguments is relevant here. Where two tables are made there are inevitably some differences, at the

least concerning location, between them. Remove just the one table, leaving all else the same, and these differences remain. There can be no grounds for thinking the second table has become, as if magically, the first. But although there are differences between Charles and Robert, there are just no differences in the strength of their claims to be Guy. They cancel one another. Remove either candidate, and the claim of the remaining might go through.³⁰

VI

Could I have had a different father? Most of us will say no. Both parents matter. Change either, or both, and you get a different child. If my mother had married a different man, I'd never have existed.

Notice, however, that there is no support for this widely held view from Kripke's near-proof. What thrust there is to that depend on our being able to imagine a world with two separate hunks of matter, and two objects derived therefrom. It targets tables made from particular hunks of wood, children developing from particular zygotes, vases thrown from particular balls of clay. But consider a situation involving the same egg, and different sperm. Given that the egg isn't itself divisible, there isn't a possible world containing two complex hunks of matter, and two subsequent children. So the duplicate puzzle won't emerge. Yet most of those confident that they couldn't have two different parents are equally confident they couldn't have one different parent.³¹

Why do we believe we couldn't have different parents? It's unlikely to be on the basis of Kripke's argument. That, recent and subtle, will hardly explain this mature and proletarian belief. And why do we believe we couldn't have a different father? The argument does no work at all here. But both beliefs are strong. And they are easily enough explained. We know too much about biology. We know that a different father would produce a substantially different child. Both the sperm and egg contain important genetic material. Change either, and the character of the resulting embryo will be significantly altered. And this is crucial. We think that someone substantially different from the outset, both physiologically and psychologically, would be a different person. An alteration to either parent would, as we truly believe, be sufficient for such alteration. And so my parents are necessary for me. Lacking either, I wouldn't exist.

Suppose the biological facts are different. Sperm is needed, and sperm differs. But which sperm is used makes no discernible difference to the resulting child. The genetic material is contained in the egg alone. Then I could have had a different father. Suppose the difference is greater. Parents are needed to produce embryos. But these are all the same. They're delivered to the laboratory where, in accordance with the government blueprint, scientists manipulate them so that the requisite sorts of children are produced. Then I could have had different parents.

VII

Consider two objections, one full-blooded, the other suggesting a compromise.

Suppose, as above, that embryos are all the same. And suppose that I say, because of this, I could have had different parents – the sperm and egg from which I developed could have been different from the ones actually employed. And I might have existed either way. But now consider an intermediate stage. Will I say that the embryo from which I developed could itself have developed from different material, or that I could have developed from different embryos? I'll need one or the other, but it may seem that neither is particularly attractive. Could this very embryo, so closely related to the sperm and egg, have had entirely different origins? That may seem hard to believe. But if so, then I have to claim that I could have developed from different embryos. So consider a further stage – could the one fetus have developed from these different embryos, or could I have developed from different fetuses? And so on. Somewhere or other there needs to be a break in identity. And it is problematic wherever it occurs.

But go back to the diagrams. Whatever problem there is here occurs just as readily with branching out as with closing in. I could have a fairly standard future ahead of me, or I could turn, magically and gradually, into a swan. Suppose this happens. The swan isn't me. Yet there may well be no answer to the question of exactly when I cease to exist, and so no answer to exactly where on the dotted line the rupture to identity takes place. Equally, there may be no answer to the question of exactly when two possible embryos would become the one human being. And neither of these versions of the sorites problem is as troublesome as it might first appear.

The compromise move, similarly, lacks real force. Think again about that response to Lucretius I mentioned earlier. Brueckner and Fischer suggest that we want a later death, but not an earlier birth, because we are inevitably future directed. The

past just doesn't interest us. Now what is wrong here is simply the factual claim about what our interests are. We do care about the past. Sometimes we wish things had happened differently. Often we're content that things happened as they did. And we recognise that it's only because the past had its particular shape that things are as they are today. And so this response to Lucretius fails.³² Nevertheless, it may be thought that foregrounding interests, while setting metaphysical speculation to one side is, over a range of issues, a profitable move. Parfit, famously, wants to separate questions of identity, strictly understood, from those concerning what matters to us, what we care about, in survival. And it might be suggested that I should avail myself of just this distinction here, conceding that differences in material makes for a difference in objects, even while pointing out that this might not be of concern to us. A table made from a different block of wood might be as good as the original table, and were there to be no distinctive genetic material in the sperm and egg, it wouldn't much matter to us who our parents were. Even so, numerical identity remains distinct – change the wood, and there's a different table, change the parents, and there's a different child. But there is no good argument for this. All that is uncontroversial here is that if the originating material is different then a pair of objects, one of them actual, the other merely possible, are not in all respects the same. That is true for a similar pair of objects, again one actual, the other possible, when we consider any change within an object's lifetime. Yet as mid-life change needn't threaten identity, so too, as far as I can tell, for change at the outset. And this isn't to bring metaphysics back into the picture, but rather to deny that there is some deep notion of identity, distinct from what an acknowledgement of our interests will cause us to say about it.

VIII

Could I have been born at a quite different time? In practice no, but in principle yes. Change significantly the time of birth and so much will be different. I think, that person wouldn't be me. None of what matters to me, and indeed to others, would survive. That it could truly be said that the person born then would have developed, just as certainly as I have developed, from a particular sperm and egg cuts no ice. As I see no reason to believe that only one person can develop from given material, so I see no reason to think that the person who does develop, whatever he is like, must be me. Even so, we can imagine some arcane situation where someone today is born into a closed, controlled and easily replicated environment. But then imagine the embryo

is frozen instead, the replica constructed, with birth and development taking place two hundred years hence. The person born then would issue from the same originating material and would be physically and psychologically the same as the person who, without freezing, would be born today. It would be the same person.³³

Could I have had different parents? In practice no, but in principle, yes. As a matter of fact the complex information contained within the genetic material of both sperm and egg determines most of my physical and some of my psychological make up. Change one or both parents, and a profoundly dissimilar person will result. That person wouldn't be me. Even so, we can imagine the situation to be different, and for the originating material to be effectively inert – human sperm and egg produce children rather than swans, but these children are all the same until the environment gives them some shape. Were that to be the case – and unlike the previous example we consider here merely a logical possibility – then I could have had different parents.³⁴

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ It is worth noting that Kripke, one of my main targets here, himself repeatedly appeals to everyday intuition in support of his views. This is clear even within the preface to *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980)

² See Anthony Brueckner and John Martin Fischer, 'Why is Death Bad?' *Philosophical Studies* 50 (1986) pp. 213-23, 'The Asymmetry of Early Death and Late Birth' *Philosophical Studies* 71 (1993) pp. 327-331, and 'Death's Badness' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 74 (1993) pp. 37-45

³ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1984) pp. 351-2.

⁴ Parfit might appear to take a different view. In endnote 6 (p.522-3) he resists the claims of those who say, of such cases, that different persons are involved. But in fact the case he considers – moving to Italy at age 3 – is importantly different from mine. Wholly different psychologies are one thing, branching psychologies with common origins another.

⁵ Though they can be taken only so far, there are, I think, parallels here with the situation in ethics. While some versions of realism are shaky – there are no free-standing moral facts as such – we might still want to insist that given our constitutions, interests, psychologies etc., it is still true that some things are right, others wrong.

⁶ See Jeff McMahan, 'The Metaphysics of Brain Death' *Bioethics* 9 (1995) pp.91-126 for a detailed defence of a mind based account of personhood. Two things are notable. First, McMahan develops his – as he admits - highly counterintuitive position in an attempt to follow through on what he takes to be an intuitively appealing starting point. Second, in the introduction to *The Ethics of Killing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) he acknowledges that these highly refined views on identity are about the least satisfactory elements of his work.

⁷ It may well be, as the editor of this journal has suggested, that the psychological approach to identity cannot, in the end, trump the biological or bodily approach. But I'm not claiming that it does. What I am suggesting, and I acknowledge that I might still be challenged on this, is that we are able legitimately to avoid being forced to choose between these views.

⁸ Kripke, fn. 56, p.114

⁹ Kripke, p.113.

¹⁰ I'm assuming here that something originating from swan material would have various swan-like properties, and that a table made of ice would look like ice. But there are reasons for thinking that Kripke, at least, will want to deny there's any necessity here. Even so, an assumption, well-founded or not, of qualitative differences will underpin these beliefs about identity differences. And see Lynne Rudder Baker, *Persons and Bodies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p.32 n.18 for some discussion of this.

¹¹ Kripke, fn. 57, pp.114 -115

¹² Does Kripke agree? Just as he is generous in the changes he allows to be possible, he seems to be generous, too, in relation to identity: '...there is no contradiction in the announcement that the Queen, this thing we thought to be a woman, was in fact an angel in human form, or an automaton....' p.111. Yet you might think that to discover these things is to discover there is no queen. But then if the angel or automaton has the appropriate regal characteristics, maybe it can be allowed that he, or it, is the queen, nevertheless.

¹³ So I'm distinguishing here, as I need to, between originating and essential properties. Consider the embryo from which I developed – even granting the origin principle, it isn't an essential property of me that I contain now the originating material. And see Parfit's endnote 6 (p.522) for related points.

¹⁴ Notice there is no straightforward correspondence here. We won't say, so long as it is the same kind of thing, it remains the same individual. A potter at his wheel can transform a vase not only into a plate, but into a different vase. And, at least magically, I could be turned either into a goat, or into a different person. Should we say, if something becomes a different kind of thing, it becomes a different individual? It might seem we should deny this. Bottom becomes an ass, but remains Bottom. Similarly for the narrator of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. And, at least magically, the queen could become a swan, but remain queenly inside. But suppose it is agreed that we fall, normally, under two kinds - human animal, and person. Then in these cases it seems that the human disappears while the person remains. And, post-transformation, neither the ass, the beetle nor the swan is a non-human animal through and through.

¹⁵ Parfit, p. 352.

¹⁶ Neither author is entirely clear. Parfit acknowledges (p. 352) the need to revise for twins, but seems to think that thereafter it will be true. Kripke makes an interesting comment in his long footnote 57: 'I might have been deformed if the fertilized egg from which I originated had been damaged in certain ways, even though I presumably did not yet exist at the time'. So certainly substantial differences won't always threaten identity. Whether they sometimes will is left open.

¹⁷ And so (and this is somewhat at odds with Kripke's position) I have sympathy with those who claim that their disability is essential to their identity, and that had the disability been removed before birth, they would not have existed. See my 'Identity and Disability' *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 17 (2000) pp. 265-276

¹⁸ There are in fact two views here. On the first, the queen acquires various swan-like properties at some stage. On the second she becomes a swan, and later becomes the queen again. This view assumes that the very same thing can go out of, and come back into existence. Some have found that problematic.

¹⁹ Kripke, fn. 56. p.114

²⁰ I'm using these terms, 'original' and 'duplicate' to distinguish, I hope clearly enough, between the two tables, without wanting to imply either any temporal priority or any overt intention to copy. And similarly throughout the discussion that follows.

²¹ The diagrams here are very similar to those used by John Mackie in an early discussion of Kripke's position in his *Problems from Locke* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976) pp. 152-155. I am grateful to Andrew Ward for pointing out the resemblances.

²² Bernard Williams 'Personal Identity and Individuation' in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) 1-18, pp. 7-11

²³ Parfit, p.355

²⁴ And we might consider further the situation when there are two. Williams insists, when Charles and Robert put in their equal claims, that it is here 'quite obvious that the idea of identity cannot be applied, and that we must fall back on similarity'.²⁴ But while it's obvious that there are two distinct human organisms here, little else is obvious. We either say, in this admittedly bizarre case, that Charles and Robert have both ceased to exist, with each replaced by similar but nevertheless distinct persons, or we say that one person - Guy - now occupies two locations, or we say, with Williams, that Charles and Robert continue to exist, even though both are much changed. These are the main, although there are further, options. It's hard to see why the facts of the case should require us to favour one response over the others. But I've no need to press this point here.

²⁵ Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1981) pp.29-70

²⁶ Bernard Williams, 'Bodily Continuity and Personal Identity' in *Problems of the Self*, pp.19-25

²⁷ What needs to be noticed here, I think, is that Williams' argument, if it works at all, undermines the entire notion of identity across time. I am the same person I was yesterday. But it's conceivable that my body should have divided, amoeba like, during the night. If it had, then the two resulting people would have been non-identical, and so neither would have had a good claim to be yesterday's person. And the

possibility of its in this way dividing challenges my claim to survive a good night's sleep, even when nothing untoward happens. But that can't be right.

²⁸ One question here is whether supporters of that account are thereby committed to challenging the necessity of identity thesis. I am so far agnostic on this. See Nozick's discussion in his very length footnote 9 (pp. 656-9) for much more on this.

²⁹ See Nathan Salmon, *Reference and Essence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982) pp.196-216 for this, and for further points. And for a related discussion see E. J. Lowe, *Survey of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). pp.103-106.

³⁰ There remains much more to say about both arguments, and about the similarities and differences between them. And although the position outlined above is, I believe, broadly correct I would, were there space, want to introduce a number of refinements and qualifications. Just one example: suppose Charles and Robert both exist - or at least that their bodies still exist - and make equally compelling claims to be Guy. Neither claim goes through. Robert is then, for unrelated reasons, killed. Though the Charles-body person is now Guy's closest continuer I have doubts about whether he is now Guy. So while a merely possible Robert won't stand in Charles' way, a once, but no longer, actual Robert perhaps will.

³¹ There's a similar situation concerning a jug. The potter makes a vessel from one lump, a handle from another, sticks them together, forms a lip and the jug is made. Could this jug have had a different handle and yet remained the same jug? Intuition, I think, says yes. And Kripke's argument suggests nothing to the contrary.

³² See Christopher Belshaw, 'Asymmetry and Non-Existence' *Philosophical Studies*, 70 (April 1993) pp. 103-116 and 'Later Death/Earlier Birth' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy – Life and Death: Metaphysics and Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) pp.69-83

³³ It is, admittedly, much harder to imagine this in my own case, where the environment was from the outset of a complexity that would be hard to replicate. So principle is here being stretched.

³⁴ David Hershenov, Steve Holland, Gary Kemp and Andrew Ward have all helped me immensely with this paper and its contents. My thanks go to them.