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Special Bodies

Sergio Scarantino

*For already have I been
a boy and a girl
a branch and a bird
and a dumb sea fish . . .
—Empedocles*

1. SURVIVAL AND A LESSER CLAIM

After I'm dead, when someone else in the world will be saying "I am here," I won't be around to say that it's someone *else* who's saying this. Can I argue then that this "other" will not be *other* anymore and that it will be just "me"? Can I say that "I" will be? That I will be *that*, when *this* no longer exists? Can I deduce from this sort of word play that "I" exist so long as there are people? That "I" am always alive?

Venturing on this old, Schopenhauerian path,¹ the problems that come to the mind of a modern traveller are of two sorts: those related to the issue of identity and survival, and those concerning the nature of the First Person, the "I." It is clear that, if the line of questioning mentioned above is not to be stopped in its tracks, one thing we need is a somewhat special sense for "I": for in an ordinary, everyday sense of the word, it is immediately obvious that after my death I, this physical person, the person who is writ-

ing this paper, Sergio, will no longer be. Only when provided with such a second sense for "I" and having ascertained that what we have is a logically and semantically defensible tool, can we attempt to find whether there is any evidence to suggest that the persistence of this thing (whatever it may be) that is "I" can be assured under certain conditions. This second venture appears to be essentially an empirical endeavor to build a case for *survival*.

The topic of survival has been extensively explored in contemporary literature. As to the meaning of "I," it is of course one that has engaged philosophers for centuries and remains one of the central issues in contemporary philosophy as well. I will make no attempt at considering even a summary of the formidable body of thought on these subjects. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to see whether, by combining some of the ideas put forward in the contemporary analysis of the issues of survival and the First Person, some new sense can be made of the old riddles mentioned at the beginning. In particular, my intention is to see if a subjective mode can be built into the view of the "world-without-me" (the world without the physical person that is me), taking the first step from one of the main tenets of the reductionist view of what we are defended by Derek Parfit²—namely, that what matters in survival is psychological connectedness. In the process, we will reach conclusions that I suspect go beyond what Parfit himself would be ready to grant. I hope to show that the metaphysical interpretation that these may suggest can be substantially (if not totally) discarded and that, in so doing, we may become aware of a metaphysical risk of a similar nature built into our ordinary beliefs about death. I realize that many of the topics discussed here would require a much more extensive treatment than the one that can be afforded in a short essay. I am confident, however, that I can convey at least a general idea of the moves involved in presenting the case.

Until recently, the issue of survival has been linked unproblematically to the criteria governing personal identity. In asking if I will survive until tomorrow, I ask if there will be a person living tomorrow and if that person will be me. The crucial answer seemed to rest on the criteria for assessing that two persons in two different times are one and the same person (the common-sense criterion being bodily continuity). I believe that Parfit has proven quite conclusively that this is wrong. I subscribe to his view that what matters in survival is not personal *identity* but psychological connectedness *with any cause* (the normal cause

being continuity of the body, but the processes involved in imaginary examples—like teletransportation, memory implants, etc.—being equally good causes). I subscribe in particular to his diagnosis as to the metaphysical fallacy that lies at the root of the error in what he calls the “normal view”: namely, that behind our conviction that the question “Will that person be me?” must have always a definite answer, there is the idea, more or less unsuspected, that what we really are involves a *deep further fact* (like a separately existing entity) beyond bodily and psychological connectedness.³ Once this deep further fact is removed, Parfit’s arguments prove quite powerfully that survival is not governed by the logic of identity (one to one, all or nothing), but admits of degrees. It is thus a matter of mere convention and not an intrinsic empirical assessment to decide what amount of my body and related functions (in other words, what amount of my brain and my memory) is necessary to warrant the conclusion that a person tampered with by an imaginary surgeon with futuristic capabilities is still me. In his treatment, psychological connectedness emerges as the only *relevant* criterion to assess if I survive either some science fiction occurrence or the ordinary molecular changes in my body from one day to the next.

How does the conclusion that survival can be a gradual affair affect our view of death, where survival seems to be precluded by definition? What happens when there is no surgeon to transplant my brain into another body, no ready procedure to implant my memories elsewhere, no teletransportation, etc.? I think the reply is that death itself can be seen as the case at the end of a spectrum of possible modifications of me and not as a deep further fact—governed by an “all or nothing” logic—beyond the continuity of this body and its functions. This point and its implications will be clarified later. But, if it is not survival, we first have to state more precisely what type of case we want to build in order to make sense of our initial questions.

I submit that, when faced with the prospect of our death, we may readily settle for a *lesser claim*: not one of *surviving* as what I know myself to be (Sergio), but one of *living* as a conscious being, with no other condition attached. What I mean is that, confronted with the prospect of annihilation, I realize that I am ready (and so, I suppose, would be many of us) to give up “much” of what constitutes me. I can certainly give up my teeth, one hand, one leg and, with increasing reluctance, everything else that can be replaced with alternative material that can perform similar

functions. I can accept to live with half of my brain, if that sustains life. But I can also accept gradual replacement of more and more cells that make up my body and brain, as long as throughout the process there remains a living being.

The question is: Where do I draw the line, in this progressive relinquishment of myself? I have learned from Parfit that there is no line to draw, no crucial cell whose replacement shifts ontologically the balance from "me" to "someone else." I know that all that is mere convention and, although I attach some importance to conventions, I am not inclined to attach to them *fundamental* importance in matters of life or death. I am therefore willing to give up Sergio, his personality, his memories, his physical features. Briefly, I am ready to give up everything that constitutes this physical person and I suggest that so are you (after all, would you have a better alternative?). More precisely, I am ready to give up everything provided that what I get at the end of the process of my demise is something that is alive: or, if a plant seems too little, alive and thinking; or, if an animal also seems too little, a human being; or, if I get ambitious, a superior alien. For the sake of argument, let us pick a human being (you will have already suspected that the conclusion here is that *all* the possible options are "normally" and simultaneously offered). It is important to note that what I am ready to settle for is not mere *being*. A stone or a plant *is*. What I want to be is clearly more than that: I want to be a center of consciousness rooted in a physical person. Apart from that, any body and any mental life would do.

We can now appreciate how much the perspective has been shifted with respect to survival. While what matters in survival is psychological connectedness, what matters in being a conscious being is just *a brain and body*. What is involved in living is the presence of a subject, not the continued existence of a given subject. As our continued existence in time does not require any "deep further fact" beyond psychological connectedness, our existence at this very moment does not imply any deep further fact beyond the existence of a functioning brain and body, carriers of psychological connectedness. *Any* brain or body. This brain and this body are necessary to being Sergio. But Sergio does not have a monopoly on existence as a conscious being. It should be clear then what *my lesser claim* in the face of death is. It is *to be someone else: anybody*, to be precise. This bears some resemblance to my birth. As Sergio is born with no memories of past lives, psychologically connected only to himself (although genetically connect-

ed to the entire human race), so would I be satisfied if I could be born again, as anybody.

This raises an immediate difficulty concerning "I." Contrasting *living* with *surviving* makes sense only when referring to a *given* subject or subjects: it makes sense, in other words, if we compare a subject today with a subject in the past, but not in the future. Only in the first instance can we argue with Parfit that the decision between assessing if a subject of the past is surviving in a subject of today, or if the subject of today is simply the living of a different subject, is a conventional one. I can ask myself if my existence today is the survival of some person in the past and conclude with Parfit that, in some cases (if the body and brain of that person in the past were tampered with at some stage), the answer is a mere conventional one. But if I ask myself the same question with reference with some future person, how can my asking if I will be *living* be different from my asking if I will be *surviving*? And if we rule out survival, as we certainly would in a case in which there is no connectedness, how could the relevant future happenings concern *me*? It is clear then that if we want to make some sense of my lesser claim ("faced with the prospect of annihilation, I would be ready to be someone else") what we need is a second sense for "I" as the subject of "to be someone else." While the "I" in the first part of the sentence is Sergio, this physical person, the "I" in the second part, the "I" that is someone else, can no longer be Sergio, who has died (or faded away) in the process.

2. THE FIRST PERSON

The terrain on which we are now moving has become increasingly the battleground of philosophical disputes between various forms of Cartesianism and various forms of anticartesianism, and the struggle has been so fierce that, at least since Ryle wrote *The Concept of Mind*, it has become increasingly difficult to make substantial room for intermediate positions, namely for Kantian constructions. An attempt at giving even a sketch of the entire picture would go much beyond the scope of this paper. For the purpose of the argument I am developing, it is sufficient to stress that the debate is far from over and that these intermediate positions are in fact very much alive.

I suggest that the best candidate for a second sense of "I" is to be found in the province of the "transcendental I" and that some of the objections it raises can be disposed of, once the con-

cept is cleared of any Cartesian fallacy, by making it clear that what we are seeking is not a distinct account of what I am in terms of some sort of mental substance, but merely a coherent notion of a particular function of the mind, that is, a function of the brain (not only my mind and my brain, but yours too) and its referent. There are several examples in recent literature of constructions of this kind. I will refer in particular to the ones proposed by Mackie, Nagel and Vendler, which I find heavily indebted to the Kantian tradition, even if they have been sometimes presented or criticized as Cartesianism more or less in disguise.⁴

Let us start with a line by Woody Allen: "My only regret is that I am not someone else." We all make sense of it, which means that we have some sort of notion, no matter how rudimentary, of what "I" means in this case. What notion is that? Clearly, if I make a similar regret mine, what I would be regretting is not that Sergio is not Sergio (which would be nonsense) but that "I" am not Sergio. I suggest that we borrow for the time being the definition, offered by Mackie,⁵ of this second "I" as *the subject, whatever it may be, of these experiences*. Mackie links explicitly this sense of "I" to what Zeno Vendler has called "feats of transference," although I think that the expression should be reformulated if it is to serve as a subject of a feat of transference, for the determinative "this" locks in, for reasons that will be made clear later on, the physical person who does the imagining. If I imagine to be Napoleon at Austerlitz, what I am imagining (no matter how imperfectly) is not that the physical person that is writing this paper, Sergio, travels through time and somehow borrows Napoleon's eyes to contemplate the battle. My fantasy is a different one: I imagine to be entirely Napoleon, with his personality, his body, his mind, his memories, his feelings and no trace of Sergio. I try to imagine what Napoleon felt at that time and how Austerlitz (or, for that matter, the world) must have been if seen through his eyes. It doesn't matter if I succeed only in part. The possibility of embarking in a similar fantasy is a real one and is based on the realization that, no matter how different are the others from me, they are not *too* different. They have bodies that perform similar functions and minds that work in a similar fashion. To be Sergio is therefore, as Vendler puts it, to be in a possible "state"⁶ and to imagine being Napoleon is to imagine to be in a different state. Who is in a different state? An empty "I," a mere "unity of consciousness," the Transcendental Self. Vendler stresses that this is not a thing, an

object in the world, for “it has no content and no essence; it is a mere frame in which any picture fits.”⁷ Equally, it is not a soul or any form of mental substance that serves to individuate me, but merely a *function of the mind*, that is a function of every normal human brain. To be more precise, if we assume that we are talking about self-consciousness in human beings, the function here involved is the perception of an objective order of things in which one particular thing—a functioning human body—is me. This is a rather complex performance that underlines a dual approach to reality and that provides the link with Nagel’s view. To make clear why self-consciousness allows for a double rule of reference to “me,” consider the following.

3. A SPECIAL BODY

There are many human bodies, all different but also all subject to the same rules of functioning. Different yet similar. Among them, *one* appears to be special. One is always *present* (it is the one I refer to when I say “I”). Its limbs are the vehicle for pain and pleasure, feeling and perception. Yet this special body is made of absolutely normal, ordinary ingredients (nerves, sensory organs, brain), which function neither better nor worse than do so many others. What accounts, then, for the difference? I seem to have nothing in my stock of knowledge, in anatomy as much as in neurology—briefly, in my objective view of the world—that accounts for it. This difference does not find an objective explanation and yet I can test it, empirically, every moment. Certain physical features, a certain personality and so forth account for Sergio. But those physical features or that personality cannot be the “special” element, for they have changed throughout the years. It is only the constant “presence” of that body, its nature as exclusive vehicle of sensations, that makes it so.

One can ask, to be sure: “Special” indeed, but for whom? Obviously, special for me. It is true that one always runs into this odd presence of a special body. But this special body is different for every subject. Therefore there is not one “truly” special body. There is only a *special perception* of the body on the part of that body itself. This is a valid response, but it is also one that opens the way for a double referent for “I.” In the first place, it shows that the datum of specialness, which is an undeniable datum of subjective experience, is not “apparent” in the sense that it is illusory or deceptive. Rather, it is a basic function of the mind of con-

scious beings: the perception of oneself as an element in the world, carrier of that function. This function points to a subject, and therefore to an "I," that is clearly the physical person that finds itself special. But this, on the other hand, is something different from the "I" that finds that no physical person is special. This (second) "I" is the subject of a non-privileged view of the world that is mine and that I share with others. This interpersonal (and not non-personal) point of view on the world is, in my reading of it, the same "View from Nowhere" (or the "Centerless View") that has led Nagel, in his book by the same title,⁸ to postulate a refinement of our objective conception of the world, with the inclusion of an "Objective Self" as his subject. Treating this as "I," I can speak consistently of how the world appears to be "given" (to me) without violating its objective nature, by which it is also "given" to everybody else. If I had been somebody else, the world would be "given" to me in a different way, the "me" here involved being the open referent of a function the mind that, in yielding this physical person, must also *yield everybody else*. This is the reason why I believe the notion of the "Objective Self" and the "Transcendental I" are closely related: both can be *resolved* in "I, this physical person," while remaining both something different since they can be equally resolved in everybody else. And this is something that everybody can relate to one's own experience. Before applying this concept to my lesser claim, we have now to test it against three objections I consider among the most important moved against the very idea of a second sense for "I." They concern, respectively, the referential force of the concept, its ability to yield a unitary subject and its semantic congruence.

4. SELF-REFERENCE

In his analysis of self-reference, Gareth Evans has claimed that "our thoughts about ourselves are in no way hospitable to Cartesianism"⁹ and has denied that in self-conscious thought one is thinking about oneself as the bearer of mental properties or as a mind (the source, in his view, of the false notion entertained by some that we are *nothing but* a mind). He argues not only that there is considerable evidence that we think of ourselves in other ways, but also that we could not possibly think of ourselves as bearers of mental properties, since this would not serve to identify us. The reason offered is, essentially, that in expressions like "the subject of this thought or these experiences" the demonstratives

in "this thought" or "these experiences" would not provide an adequate idea of the thoughts or experiences involved without an adequate conception of the person who is having the thoughts or the experiences. A subject could not, therefore, identify himself by reference to them.

As I see it, the case is somewhat overstated. Evans is right in pointing out that the mere reference to mental properties is insufficient to *identify* the individual that I know myself to be. But we should not be forced to conclude that we cannot *characterize* ourselves as bearers of mental properties and, in particular, of self-consciousness, and therefore that we cannot think of ourselves in that way. I agree with Evans that we cannot form a notion of ourselves without referring to a physical entity in the objective order of things. In fact, we could not have a notion of *thought* if not as thought of a person. But then, precisely because the notion of a person is *built into* the notion of thought, nothing prevents me from referring to myself as a thinker of thoughts. Evans introduces, as a possible example of a subject that cannot have an adequate idea of himself, the imaginary case of a human brain existing from birth in a vat and subjected by scientists to a series of hallucinations of a kind which would enable the brain to develop normal cognitive faculties. If apprised of the facts, Evans claims, "he would have to abandon the Idea of himself as the occupant of a position in space" and "would have to attempt to think of himself as nowhere."

I find here an interesting contradiction: How could the subject *be apprised of the facts* and therefore grasp that his world is not real without in fact retaining a notion of the world (the "real" one) and a notion of himself as a subject that is *somewhere* (even if in a world that he cannot see)? The contradiction is a revealing one, for the alleged impossibility to form an adequate notion of himself in this case seems to stem from the attribution of *conscious* thoughts (thoughts recognizable as such by the subject) into which no conception of "being the thoughts of a physical entity" has been built. Not only does this contradict the very assumptions of the example, but further evidence that this is wrong can be produced considering what I believe to be a proper case of a thinking subject who cannot form an idea of himself.

Imagine a man that since birth is mute and paralyzed and is positioned in such a way that he cannot see his body. Imagine further that all his physical needs are attended to through instruments that he cannot see and that, although seeing and hearing

people in front of him and maybe witnessing their leading a normal life, he is totally *ignored* by them. I submit that such a person could in fact develop a rather elaborate (although obviously incomplete) view of the world he sees (perhaps just a room) and of the people in it and their relations, but he would not develop a notion of himself because he would have no opportunity (and no need) to form the concept that what he is experiencing is the experience of a physical entity located somewhere. He might form the notion that a certain area of the room (particularly if the room is very large) is somewhat special, for when people are there they can be seen more clearly and their words more clearly heard and their closeness might be more gratifying. He might thus develop the notion of a privileged space, but he would not form the notion that *he* is there and that he is hearing, seeing or feeling gratified. He might grasp the concept of "me" used by the people around him, but in so doing he would grasp only their referring to themselves and would not form a notion of self-reference as reference to himself. *But he would not form an appropriate notion of thought either.* Subject of thought and physical subject go together. For this reason, no account of the empirical genesis of the "I-thought" (the discovery that one is a person) can detract from the referential force of the concept "the subject of these thoughts" we can build on it. Once learned what I am, this a perfectly good way—although indirect, as pointed out by Mackie—of referring to myself.

The same applies to experiences. In seeing a tree or hearing a beep and realizing that I am seeing it or hearing it, I am aware of the tree or the sound as much as I am aware that I am having the experience of it, and nothing prevents me from referring to it as "this" experience. In fact, we shift our perspective in this way (from the tree or the sound to the experience of myself seeing a tree or hearing a sound) whenever we call into question the ability of our senses to perform accurately (for instance, at an oculistic exam). Of course such reference as "the subject of this experience" does not give me any clue as to what individual physical being is having the experience. But what does that prove? It proves that the notion "the thinker of this thought" is dependent on different criteria for identifying myself¹⁰ and is therefore insufficient, by itself, to locate me in the world as *this* specific individual (which was the ambition of the Cartesian Ego). However, since it places me in the world as *somebody, somewhere*, it is certainly not meaningless. The expression has lost some of its referential force with

respect to this physical body, but it has not lost a referent: it refers indirectly to me and directly to a particular function of my brain, self-consciousness, that is capable of grasping not only this body, but also itself. As such, this function is not a physical body, but it points to one that must be found: the physical body is both its object and its subject, for a physical body is built into the notion of thought (or experience). Being common to all human beings, such function is liable to yield every possible human subject. Sergio realizes through this function that this function is rooted in this physical person, Sergio. But he also realizes that it is rooted in everybody else. Why call this function "I" and not mere consciousness? For the simple (and metaphysically innocuous) reason that, whatever it nets, *in netting itself* it nets something that I am. I am Sergio, but in being Sergio I am for me a special body, a "presence" in the world.

In the light of the response given to Evans' concern for the referential force of the demonstratives here involved, the only amendment that I would propose to Mackie's formulation for the subject of a feat of transference is "the thinker of the *present* thoughts." This still contains a meaningful linkage with this physical individual, but one that is not as committed to his actual thoughts and memory, for it locks in a whole category of possible subjects that are "present" in the world, and for each one of them it locks in himself.

This is precisely the type of notion I use in thinking that the exercise of this function of self-consciousness, of which I am aware, could be netting at this very moment—and *not because of a factual mistake of my senses in individuating my body*—a different subject. That is, that I could have been (or could be) someone else. Only when we progressively give up "these" actual physical features, as we do in my lesser claim, we must also give up "these (actual) thoughts." This would leave us with a generic "thinker of these (or present) thoughts" as open (some would say, erroneously in my view, as hollow) as "the thinker of thoughts" or, as Kant would say, "consciousness in general."¹¹ This would be a vastly incomplete account of Sergio, but it would still be an account of what matters in Sergio being *me*, since the "thinker of thoughts" points to a body that perceives itself as special.

5. UNITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS (ONLY ONE SUBJECT?)

A further objection concerns the *unity* of the subject in "the thinker of this thought." As formulated by Elizabeth Anscombe in a famous essay,¹² the questions are: "What guarantees the same referent in different I-thoughts?" or "How do I know that I is not ten thinkers thinking in unison?" or again, in the words of P. F. Strawson, "How could the—or each—*soul* persuade itself of its uniqueness?"¹³ Strawson's reference to "souls" shows that, once again, this seems to be, as Anscombe puts it, an "intolerable difficulty" for Cartesianism, but not for the "Transcendental I." Various excellent replies have been offered¹⁴ and I have nothing substantial to add to them.

It is worth, however, stressing a point that appears as an underlying motive. The need to identify a distinct and unitary subject arises at the level of identification of a physical body. The Cartesian conception tries to locate an individual entity that is exclusively me through thought alone and therefore needs to build a unity of thought, severed from criteria of reference to a body, that it fails to find. But at the level of experiences, the concern for unity is not justified. Once aware that I am a physical being capable of thoughts, I do not need to further identify my thoughts (in order to identify me) as if they were objects in the objective order of things, simply because they are not objects. It is their author who is one. I do not need to distinguish my 'bundle of experiences' from other bundles to identify me, because I use other criteria to identify me. The question of what physical thing I actually am may well remain open: I could be the sum of many things (in fact, I am the sum of many cells), I could be spatially scattered, I could be two brains linked together or the subject of other imaginary example, I could even be ten thinkers (bodies) thinking in unison: but, in any case, whatever I am, I am the totality of the things I am and experience the totality of the experiences I have. I have no problem of unifying the experiences that I have because I don't have to *make them mine* (as distinct from others). There is nothing in addition to the totality of *these* experiences which is their being mine: all are mine because all are experienced.¹⁵

6. FEATS OF TRANSFERENCE: THE IMAGINED SELF

The third and last objection that I intend to discuss here is the "classical" attack against the legitimacy of a second sense for "I" as arising from feats of the imagination, moved by Bernard Williams in an influential essay on the subject.¹⁶ Williams concedes that "I might have been somebody else" is a very primitive and very real thought and that it "tends to carry with it an idea that one knows what it would be like for this 'I' to look out on a different world, from a different body, and still be the same 'I.'" If we press this hard enough, he says, we readily get the idea that it is not necessary to being *me* that I should have any of the individuating properties that I do have, this body, these memories, etc., so that the limiting state of this progressive relinquishment of my features is "the Cartesian center of consciousness: an 'I' without body, past, or character." Williams focuses on how this attenuated form of "I" works in another speculation—that I might not have existed—claiming that "this we certainly want to agree to: few will be persuaded that their own existence is a necessary feature of the universe." The subject of "I might not have existed," goes the argument, must be the same attenuated "I" of "I might have been somebody else." The reason is that, if it referred to this physical person, it would not be an adequate account of what I want to express: for if nobody had existed with the properties that I actually have I could still have existed, in the line of the previous speculation, as someone else. But if this is so and the "I" of "I might not have existed" is the Cartesian center of consciousness, it is impossible to see what "I might not have existed" can possibly mean, since it now looks "as though there is absolutely nothing left to distinguish any Cartesian 'I' from any other, and it is impossible to see any more what would be subtracted from the universe by the removal of *me*." The difficulty, according to Williams, works back to the original speculation. If I conceive that I might have been Napoleon, what could be the difference between the actual Napoleon and the imagined one? "All I have to take to him in the imagined world is a Cartesian center of consciousness; and that, the real Napoleon had already." Nothing would change in the world and therefore it is impossible to see what "I might have been Napoleon" could possibly mean if there is nothing verifiable about it.

I think there is a mistake here. Williams assumes that the attenuated "I" is the Cartesian center of consciousness and pro-

ceeds accordingly, treating it as an attempt (bound to fail) to identify a separately existing entity that is me and exclusively me and that is made of thought and thought alone. But the "I" of the feat of transference is not necessarily the Cartesian center of consciousness. In fact, it can (indeed, it must) be construed as the transcendental "I" and, from that standpoint, Williams's case fails to take stock of the fact that, as long as there is conscious life there is "me" (in the Kantian sense of a transcendental unity of apperception). To go back to the initial step of his argument, the admission that he wants to extort from us (that I am not a necessary feature of the universe) is conditional on acknowledging the possibility that there might be no conscious life in the universe. The same applies when Williams claims that, approaching the same point from the opposite end, we might admit that someone could exist with just those empirical properties that I as a matter of fact have and yet that person not be me. Again, from the standpoint of the Transcendental "I," this speculation is not compatible with my non-existence, but it can only be made assuming that "I" am someone else, in which case "I" would still exist. Then, while it is certainly true that there is nothing to distinguish any Cartesian center of consciousness from another, it cannot follow from this that it is impossible to see what would be subtracted from the universe by the removal of the attenuated "I" (the Transcendental "I"). What would be subtracted would be all conscious life. This is a perfectly intelligible hypothesis and a sadly plausible one. In turning to the second part of the argument, to find out what "I could have been someone else" means, a science-fiction example might help.

7. SWITCHING SELVES

In the year 3001 a device for totally interchanging the Self was developed. Finally human beings were able to satisfy one of their deepest dreams: to find out what it is like to be someone else. What one feels to have not one's own mind, but someone else's. In the past there had been various brain transplants from one person to another, which had elicited more than a few polemics—moral, legal, religious. Now, however, the leap was far more radical. It was not a matter of inserting the memory of one body into another body, but rather of experiencing totally and without any alteration someone else's being through his own mind, without making any change in it. It became possible, if only for a few minutes, to totally transfer the Self of one body into that of another and then trans-

fer each of them back again into the original owners, without lasting modifications. The transfer was, as said, total but also completely harmless, inasmuch as the personality of the two individuals did not go through any alterations through the experiment. To assure the purity of the transfer, the memories of both individuals were not altered.

When the experiment finally occurred, the result was, to say the least, disappointing. It so happened, in fact, that the subjects couldn't register the fact that the transfer had actually taken place. They simply remained the same. Since the personality of each one, their respective individual memories, their minds, remained unchanged, there wasn't even a way to ascertain that the experiment had been successful. Since no one knew how to correct this one flaw, the idea was soon shelved . . .

What exactly is the moral of this story? One consequence seems easy to draw. The experiment could take place today and we would not be aware of it. If God were playing this game and, let's say, I were you now, or you meanwhile had become him, how would we be able to know it? What difference would it make that the concerned individual may grasp? None, quite obviously. It wouldn't make any difference because it is the very notion of such an experiment that is senseless: one cannot understand, in fact, what would be "transferred" from one mind to the other when the mind (or rather the functioning body) is all that exists of a subject (it is the Subject itself), without any remainders able to travel off. But this is different from saying that being this person or another would not make any difference for *me*. As a matter of fact, it would make a great difference. But nothing would be *transferred* from one individual to the other, for every individual is his own Self. Rather, the situation is like looking at the same scene (the world) from different holes in a fence (human beings). One can move from one hole to the other and change his perspective accordingly, but the view from each hole (the Self of every individual) remains the same. What is "moved" is not the Self, which is mere self-reference of each subject,¹⁷ but the possibility of a particular subject being me. We already know that this does not add anything to the subject itself. What changes is my rooting in the world, or, to borrow an expression used by Evans in connection with an observation made by Nagel, the "immediate environment" of the subject. Nagel had written:

I can conceive impersonally my house burning down, and the individual T. N. standing before it, feeling hot and miserable, and looking hot and miserable to bystanders. . . . If I add to all the premise

that I am T. N., I will imagine *feeling* hot and miserable, *seeing* the sympathetic bystanders, etc.; but this is not to imagine anything happening differently.¹⁸

Evans, resisting the suggestion that this might show that we do not know what to make of the identity-proposition $I = T. N.$, has argued (correctly, in my view) that such identity-proposition need not make any difference to how the spatio-temporal map of the world is conceived, but it will make a great difference to how the subject's immediate environment is conceived. In claiming that we don't know what is for this identity to be true, Nagel was looking, according to Evans, for the impact in the wrong place.¹⁹

Let's return now to the second part of Williams's argument and see what "I could have been someone else" means. It means that, in netting myself, the function of self-consciousness would net a different physical body. If "I" is a frame in which every picture fits, it means that the frame would contain in this case a different picture. This is not something that would be verified empirically, for the reasons discussed before. It would make no difference in the world as conceived objectively (just as the fact that I am Sergio does not make an objective difference in the world), but it would make a great difference to how my place in the world would be conceived. I can express this by saying that it would make a difference for the thinker of the present thoughts, for he would be no longer this physical person. The sentence "I could have been someone else" expresses therefore something that everybody can understand (for it evokes a possibility that everybody can imagine for himself). It would be a possibility similar to "here could be a different place," which would be tantamount to saying "we could be somewhere else" or "the present could be different," which would be tantamount to saying "we could be living in a different time."

8. DEATH A FURTHER FACT?

The concept of "Transcendental I" is the key to making sense of my lesser claim. This is the subject who can be someone else, the subject who is left after I have given up all the physical features of Sergio, the subject of my ultimate concern.²⁰ So far, we have proven only that being someone else is a logically coherent hypothesis. But is it also a factual possibility?

Does this "I" survive my death? It is obvious that it does, as long as there are conscious living beings, because every conscious

being has all that is required to be "me" in the sense of the "Transcendental I," and my actually being one or another future person would add nothing that they don't already have. Can my lesser claim therefore be granted? The answer is that ordinarily it *is* granted. The only empirical requirement is *a* body and *a* brain, and all that is required for that is the continued existence of a universe capable of producing conscious life forms.

Many of us may regard this as an utterly irrelevant conclusion, since it leaves us in the end with a subject totally unconnected with me. How could that be of any interest to me?²¹ Others may feel that the conclusion that as long as there is anyone there is me is simply preposterous. To me, both are largely understandable but neither rests on solid grounds. Starting with the first reaction, I think there should be ample evidence by now that what emerges from my lesser claim still concerns me in a relevant sense: what is lost in death is something that I am ultimately willing to give up, but what I value most, the possibility of being in the world somehow and somewhere and the possibility of being born as Sergio was born, is not something that is there to be lost. This should prompt us to take a closer look at our ordinary concept of death.

To make this clear, reconsider now the "combined spectrum" suggested by Parfit.²² This consists, as is well known, of a range of possible cases of combination of the cells that make up the bodies of two individuals, say of Sergio and Greta Scacchi, the actress. At the near end of the spectrum there is a person psychologically and physically continuous with Sergio as he is now, a person that I would not hesitate to call "me." At the far end, there is a person psychologically and physically continuous with Greta Scacchi, that is, a person that we would call unproblematically Greta Scacchi. In the middle, there are all the possible combinations of the two persons, with the switching of only a few (or one) cell to distinguish one case from the next. Assuming that in every case the cells that are not used are destroyed, my death is identical with the opposite case at the far end of the spectrum, with Nature being the surgeon that destroys my functioning body and that, out of organic matter, creates a person totally unconnected with me. Parfit used the spectrum to argue that the cases in the middle show that there is not always a difference between some future person's being me and his or her being someone else. What we assume to be a deep difference (deep as the difference between life and death) between two cases is just a stipulation. Of the far

end of the spectrum, Parfit says that "it could not be clearer that, in this case, the resulting person would not be me." But, it seems to me, if the cases in the middle of the spectrum must be assessed by a stipulation, so must be, by the same token, the cases at the two extremities: there is no case where the assessment becomes suddenly an intrinsically empirical one. If we draw a sharp line anywhere along the combined spectrum, we cannot believe that it has an intrinsically rational significance because the line would fall between two neighboring cases separated only by the trivial difference of a few cells. By the same argument, then, there must be *another possible description* of the two cases at the two extremities of the spectrum, one that is ruled out by a stipulation and not because it is intrinsically wrong. The stipulation must be the same in all cases: roughly, that we call "someone else" somebody that is "much" unconnected with us. The possible description that is ruled out by this is, then, that Greta Scacchi is a *completely modified version of me*. This brings out clearly that what is assumed to be an *intrinsic* difference is just the strong holding of a stipulation and that the intrinsic element is just a metaphysical bias as to the deep further fact involved in being me. In thinking about death, we can equally well think of a passage "all the way" between the two extremities of the spectrum, of the disappearance of a person into another. This, as I see it, would be a proper reading of Parfit's own comments on how to regard "my death," in *Reasons and Persons*:

after my death, there will be no one living who will be me. I can now redescribe this fact. Though there will later be many experiences, none of these experiences will be connected to my present experiences by chains of such direct connections as those involved in experience-memory, or in the carrying out of an earlier intention. (281)

It is clear, then, that redescribing death as a case of transformation along a spectrum, with nothing but conventions ruling it, we can see that in our ordinary concept there is a dichotomy that should not be there. When we face the loss of someone, we mourn the loss of that physical person, of its personality, of its physical and psychological features. But when facing the prospect of our own death we do not simply fear the loss of this individual, whose features we are more or less attached and totally accustomed to: we fear the loss of *everything*, of the world, since the world appears to be exclusively "given" to each of us through "this" particular person that we all call "myself."

Isn't there a metaphysical fallacy in this? I think there is and the consideration of the combined spectrum shows that it has to do with the idea that my existence cannot be a stipulation (and therefore cannot be a gradual affair or "a matter of content"), because I am some sort of absolute entity (a deep further fact) beyond this body and its continuity. We have already seen that this is wrong. Precisely, the mistake is to think that the fact that the world is "given" through this person is some sort of absolute truth, that this physical person is the sole proprietor of a special quality of "delivering the world." We should, on the contrary, consider that the world is equally "given" each time there is a conscious person around. Death itself is not a deep further fact (the loss of the world would be precisely that) beyond the end of this body and these memories.

9. *DUST TO DUST*

Those who do not believe that some life in the Beyond has been revealed, and do not imagine they will transmigrate after death to a world of souls, where rewards and punishments are meted out to revived bodies or to souls that are nonetheless simulacra of those bodies, generally believe that death is the "end of everything." A similar belief is expressed, in biblical terms, by phrases like "dust to dust." As it turns out, the reference to dust is more accurate. But the idea remains, powerfully, that of nothingness. Is it rational to fear this total loss, or is there also, in the ordinary view, a deep further fact to be removed? We have already answered. The idea of my death as the "end of everything" suggests a sort of "state": eternal sleep, the dark, the eternal void of non-being, of not-being-there. The "subjective" quality of this image (the implication of a subjective state of death) is precisely what is wrong with it: the fallacy is in placing a subject (a special body) in a situation when there is no room for one. To put it in other terms, there is no center of consciousness of a "death state" and no feelings to define an *experience* of "being dead" as opposed to "being alive." (Equally, being alive is not an experience: it is a prerequisite of experience.) Another way to put the ordinary view is "From nothing we came and to nothing we shall return." Let us see in what sense this is plausible. It would not be so if we claimed to be ignorant of our origin in the world. On the contrary, we know what materials we are made of. But we also know that these materials were here before we were: except that they were

not assembled in the specific way they are "Us." The materials of which the machine I am writing with is composed existed before this "unity" of theirs existed, this combination of theirs that is, precisely, the machine. Over time they underwent innumerable transformations, yet there is nothing mysterious in the origin of the machine. We can say of ourselves, then, as we say of the machine, that before a certain time we did not exist, that there were no parts of our unity (of the unity that we are), without our thereby conjuring up, for this very reason, mysterious origins.

This is the sense, ordinary and harmless as it is, in which I think the sentence "From nothing we come, and to nothing we shall return" is true: being a certain composition of matter, of the biblical "dust," a certain phase in the flux of the transformation of matter, we exist for a limited time. Before and after that time, there is nothing of that composition of matter that I am. But this is not to say that there is *the* "Nothing," in the sense of a definite metaphysical entity (since there is still the world), but rather that there is *none of the consciousness that I am*. But if it is true in this sense that we come from nothing, it is equally true, by the same token, that *nothing is required* for "coming," in the form of any body whatsoever that perceives itself as special, that is, in the form of a Subject, given the existence of the world (given the *dust*). The idea of "nothingness" as a sort of place where we go when we die is just a misleading metaphor. But if we choose to insist on the language of metaphor and myth, nothingness cannot be only that toward which one goes, but something out of which one comes. Something out of which we, who have the *evidence* of birth to life, have come.

What of Sergio is destined to die? Everything, obviously. My mind is a function of this body and, when the function ceases, nothing of it remains. But insofar as it is *matter* ("dust") and part of the world, something remains of that which has made me that death cannot take away from the world: and this is the possibility of an "act of birth," the principle by which one is born. Precisely because I, ordinary thing that I am, come from dust, this dust is sufficient to manifest an ordinary thing. After Sergio's death, there will still be all the ingredients by which life and subjectivity are given in the world, and through which one says "I" and lives that "I." There will not be *these* ingredients, but ingredients there will be. I need hardly to stress that I am not speaking here of reincarnation, since there is nothing to be incarnated or reincarnated, nothing that may "transmigrate." The process is rather the

reverse. It is the matter that is animated, that is organized and becomes memory, consciousness, individuality, thought. We are not in a house of souls waiting to be called upon to inhabit a body. Matter turns into us and calls itself "I." This is "my" origin, and this "my" future. I am matter. There is nothing more; but there is also nothing less. I am not the spirit who is the "owner" of this body, but I am this *dust* which has in itself the property of being flesh and "spirit." In death we do not take the world with us, but only a particular view of the world. We partake of a change of forms, of the transformation of matter. We remain here. Not like Lazarus, called up from the tomb to be himself once more: but rather, like a plant-bud, or an animal, or a baby, that is new every time.

I still owe a response to those who find all this preposterous. I think that, inasmuch as it plays a role here, the impression that the notion of Greta Scacchi being a modified version of me is absurd, this can be lessened on reflection that both Greta Scacchi and I are, after all, both human beings. But there is a better response. Nagel has written, commenting on Parfit's claim that we can choose what type of beings to think of ourselves as, that

there must be some objective limits to the freedom to reconstrue oneself, or it will become hollow. I can't defeat death by identifying myself as "Proteus Nagel," the being who survives if *anyone* survives.²³

In fact, there *is* such a limit. But we should be clear as to what its nature is. I don't think for a moment that we can stipulate anybody into existence. But we can stipulate if a future existing person is me. Parfit's combined spectrum proves that there is no *ontological* impossibility in calling "me" what emerges if my lesser claim is granted. The degree of tolerance for the stretching of conventional satisfaction in defining "me" depends then entirely on what we are attached to in "me" and not on what we consider ourselves to be, since this second is the result and not the cause of the stipulation. If I place all that I value in Sergio, I am not interested in the lesser claim. The loss of this individual will be the loss of everything that matters, and the loss of my world will be psychologically equivalent to the loss of the world pure and simple. I would then describe my story saying that:

a) an entire universe has been necessary to make this small thing that I am appear once briefly on earth and there is nothing more to it.

If, on the contrary, while being attached and totally accustomed to Sergio, his memories, his body and his view of the world, what I ultimately value is to be in the world and enjoy a mental life—and not necessarily the mental life, the memories and the body of Sergio—then what my lesser claim has to offer is significant for me. I would then describe my story saying that:

b) Sergio is only one of the innumerable ways in which one can be in the world, and there is more to it than just being Sergio.

From this second standpoint, being in the world is incessantly given and death is only a rhythm of a flux, the end of a certain train of thoughts and the beginning of another, unconnected one. I do find in this prospect an unsettling element. It joins us, much more intimately than we would like, perhaps, to the fate of all living beings, including those we consider inferior ones, in a universe that does not always deal charitably with its creatures. But, at the same time, I feel like Parfit some consolation, for, in taking this path, I become convinced that, even when Sergio no longer exists, I, which will then be something different but no less real, shall continue to partake—in a way that Sergio does not know and never will know, although it is there right before his eyes—in this awesome festival of life.

It is clear then that we have two ways to go: either we take the lesser claim or we do not. But the choice has to rest on our attitude and values rather than on our ability to settle the issue on empirical or logical grounds. Recognizing this, a rigorously neutral approach would thus perhaps require that the reply to the question “What should I think of what comes after my death?” be that I should think *nothing* about it. Considering, however, how strong is my urge to think *something* of it, for its direct bearing on how I regard my life, such a conclusion strikes me as a profound and somewhat startling departure from our ordinary views and dispositions. To decide how to regard our death and its aftermath, one way or the other, remains a powerful motive in our thinking, emotionally and existentially inescapable. If the considerations made so far have injected a doubt that our convictions might rest, ontologically, on hollow grounds, the purpose of this paper has largely been attained.

Those who do not think that the world around them is ultimately rooted in mystery will not find it particularly perplexing

that they are alive in the world now. By contrast, those who feel that there is a mystery here and measure their thoughts against it seem destined to this non-conclusion: that this sort of enigma might be something that cannot be resolved but something that must be lived.

New York, February 1991

1. See in particular Chapter 41, "On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Inner Nature," in *The World as Will and Representation*, translated from the German by E. F. J. Payne (Dover Publications, New York 1969).

2. See in particular Chapter 11 of *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984).

3. An interesting analysis of some of the metaphysical doctrines that may be involved is provided by Peter Unger in *Identity, Consciousness and Value* (New York 1990). Unger's book is a good example of the possibility of retaining much of Parfit's approach while reaching substantially different conclusions (in Unger's case, in favor of a physically based approach). I don't need to stress that Parfit's views are largely controversial ones. But nothing I have read strikes me as a convincing refutation. In Unger's case, the compromises suggested in favor of a more conservative view, although meticulously argued, seem to me to rely quite heavily on highly subjective responses to the imaginary cases presented.

4. Even if this will emerge clearly from what follows, it is worth recalling here a few examples. J. Tuchman asks in her *Philosophy and the Mind* (Oxford 1988) if Nagel's position on the limits of our conception of objective reality (in *The View from Nowhere*, New York 1986) is "crypto-cartesian" (p.102). Her negative answer rests on the conclusion that "for Nagel the dualism of the objective and the subjective is temporary" and that eventually an integrated theory of reality will prevail. As I see it, a better reply would be that Nagel's view is not crypto-cartesian because it is a Kantian view. As for Mackie, his defense of a second sense for "I" invites criticism for the very reason that the concept is explicitly introduced "in the style of a Cartesian Ego," while what is in fact introduced is not the Cartesian Ego (see J. L. Mackie, "The Transcendental I," in *Philosophical Subjects, Essays Presented to P. F. Strawson*, edited by Zak Van Straaten, Oxford 1980). Finally, the "feats of transference" on which Vendler has built his case for the 'Transcendental I' (see Z. Vendler, "A Note to the Paralogisms," in *Contemporary Aspects of Philosophy*, edited by G. Ryle, Stocksfield 1977 and *The Matter of Minds*, New York 1984) have been attacked mainly with anti-cartesian ammunition (See B. Williams, "Imagination and the Self," in *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge 1973).

5. J. L. Mackie, "The Transcendental I," pp. 48-61. Mackie defends the referring quality of "I." In his view, "I" regularly refers to the human being who uses it, but this reference is secured by two different rules which constitute different senses for "I." One links it directly to this human being and the other links it directly only to the subject, whatever it may be, of these experiences and therefore only indirectly and contingently to this human being.

6. See Z. Vendler, *The Matter of Minds*, p. 105.

7. See Z. Vendler, "A Note to the Paralogisms," in *Contemporary Aspects of Philosophy*, edited by G. Ryle, (Stocksfield 1977), p. 117.

8. See T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, Chapter 4.

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9. See Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford 1982), p. 256.
 10. This means that the empirical criteria for subject identity (as a physical person) are in practice not severed. See P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (London 1966), p. 165.
 11. See P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense*, p. 166.
 12. See G. E. M. Anscombe, "The First Person," in *Mind and Language*, edited by Samuel Guttenplan (Oxford 1975), pp. 45-65.
 13. P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense*, p. 168.
 14. See for instance J.L. Mackie, "The Transcendental I," pp. 58-59, R. Chisolm, *The First Person* (Minneapolis 1981) pp. 87-89 and in particular the following point on simultaneous perceptions made by F. Brentano in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973): "if we find the perception of seeing in one thing and the perception of hearing in another, in which of these things do we find the perception of their simultaneity? Obviously, in neither of them. It is clear, rather, that the inner cognition of one and the inner cognition of the other must belong to the same real unity" (p. 160).
 15. I am indebted for an insight on this point to Thomas Nagel, who read a previous draft of this paper. I assume however full responsibility for its use in the text in connection with a response to the problem of the unity of consciousness.
 16. Bernard Williams, "Imagination and the Self," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 40-45.
 17. Incidentally, it may be noted that this is why the immunity from reference-failure in the case of the Self fails to legitimate a second sense for "I" (which was the project of E. Anscombe in her essay on "The First Person") and yields nothing, suggesting (to Anscombe) the false conclusion that "I" is a non-referring term. The "Transcendental I" is not the Self.
 18. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970), p. 103.
 19. See Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford 1982), p. 211.
 20. Arnold Zuboff has defended in a recent essay ("One Self: The Logic of Experience," in *Inquiry*, March 1990) a view that appears to me closely related, in its overall thrust, to the project of this paper but that lacks a treatment of the First Person in terms of the Transcendental "I." This leads Zuboff to the dubious conclusion that "we are all the same person." I find this stretching of the concept of person unnecessary and indefensible. The way I would put it, we are neither the same person nor the same Self, but rather the same Transcendental I.
 21. This position would be similar to that of the dying philosopher imagined in J. Perry, *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality* (Hackett, Indianapolis 1978), who does not find any comfort in "merger with being or some such nonsense" (p. 4). She would ask for nothing but survival and would not be ready to settle for my lesser claim.
 22. See D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 236-243.
 23. See T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, p. 45, n.11.