

## DOUBLE-TALK ABOUT PERSONS

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### I

The philosophical importance of the concept of personhood is seldom doubted; it deserves and receives much attention. Indeed, many philosophers believe that the resolution of a number of pressing philosophical problems, such as abortion and euthanasia, depends in part on the analysis of this concept. Common to most treatments, however, is the not unreasonable unargued premise that there are such entities as persons. The explicit philosophical inquiries, therefore, concern themselves with questions about the nature and significance of persons, rather than about their existence.

Richard Double has argued, however, that persons do not exist.<sup>1</sup> He approaches the question by postulating a supposedly imaginary planet, which is earthlike in every respect—even to possessing humanoid inhabitants who are indistinguishable from human beings. Then, Double asks whether these humanoids are persons. In order to answer this question, he considers the conditions that would have to be met for an entity to be a person, according to two main theories in the philosophy of mind, the Cartesian and the Materialist.

But, Double argues, the humanoids would not meet the conditions of personhood for either theory, and therefore, they are not persons. (It appears to follow from his argument, though he does not make this point, that there are no persons on any planet whatever, since nowhere would the necessary conditions be found.)

Double's argument thus rests on the criteria which an entity must display in order to constitute a person. Presumably not wishing to prejudge the case unduly, Double considers two theories of the nature of personhood, the Cartesian model and the Materialist. On the view of the former, he notes, "... a person, strictly speaking, is his

nonphysical mind wherein all his mental states occur, although his body, including the brain, causally interacts with the mind. Cartesians, who are sometimes called "dualists" for obvious reasons, typically hold with Plato that these nonspatial, nonphysical centers of consciousness are indestructible, thus providing both unified personal identity throughout time despite changes to the body and immortality after the body perishes.<sup>2</sup>

This view is, of course, deeply rooted in Western modes of thought, both religious and secular. It has always been a central doctrine of both Christian and Islamic theism, and it underlies much, if not most, popular thought on life and death.

By contrast, the Materialist view of persons—not surprisingly—centers on physical matter. Double states:

Materialists build a theory of persons in the same way they would build a theory of physics, biology, or engineering—and with similar results. They hold that persons are their physical bodies (including the brain, of course) in the way that lightning flashes are discharges of electricity in the atmosphere or genes are molecules of nucleic acid.<sup>3</sup>

Despite such fundamental disagreement, Double argues, both Cartesianism and Materialism agree on one important point: a person is a substance. "A person is SOMEONE, a SELF, in philosophical parlance, a SUBSTANCE that retains its own identity while it changes its 'accidental attributes.'"<sup>4</sup> This conclusion is warranted, Double thinks, because "... only substantial beings could DO all the things that persons do—streams of physical or nonphysical events will not fill the bill."<sup>5</sup> Rejected out of hand is thus any theory of the mind which denies the existence of mental substance; in particular, Double explicitly denies the cogency of Hume's "bundle theory" of the self, which holds that the mind consists solely of the sequence of immediate experiences of which it is aware, while arguing against the existence of an enduring mental substance behind them.

Double thus attempts to deduce the conclusion that there are no persons at all by arguing that the conditions of neither Cartesian nor materialistic personhood could be met. The first move is to undermine the dualist Cartesian position, resting as it does on a concept of mind as non-physical or immaterial. To do so, Double calls on the rapidly growing body of neurophysiological evidence that conscious experience is causally dependent on brain function. For example, he notes,

It has been discovered that sometimes epileptic seizures in humans can be reduced in severity by performing a brain bisection (commissurotomy) in which the connective tissue that permits the transmission of electrical charges between the two hemispheres is severed.<sup>6</sup>

This procedure leaves the mental functions of the patient largely intact, but certain odd consequences can be detected under experimental conditions. For example, if such a patient

... was given a different physical object in each hand while blindfolded and, then, with blindfold removed and the objects mixed with others in a pile before him, was asked to retrieve what was in his hand, each hand would search separately, rejecting the item that the other hand held while looking for the object it held.<sup>7</sup>

In the face of such evidence, Double concludes, we should

... surrender the prescientific notion of unified centers of consciousness, as we have had to surrender such other prescientific notions as up/down and sunrise/sunset.<sup>8</sup>

And thus

... it follows that if the humanoids are persons... then they must be Materialist substances.<sup>9</sup>

Does this mean that Materialism stands triumphant and can define persons in a

conceptually satisfactory way? Double does not think so. The form of Materialism Double selects for examination is one he calls "Scientific Realism." The relevance of Scientific Realism to Double's argument is that, according to that position, even matter is immaterial! That is, the appearance of material objects does not reflect reality; rather,

... our senses systematically cause us to believe that there are colored, shaped, textured, solid, enduring, macroscopic physical objects where there are none.<sup>10</sup>

So what we normally take to be material substance is not what it seems at all. What appears to be a solid table is in fact only a congeries of atoms which are mostly empty space, and in any case contain no material substance remotely resembling what we think we see and feel.

We have already remarked on Double's conclusion that if there are persons, they must be materialistic person.<sup>11</sup> That is, they must consist of material bodies, including brains. But now, according to Scientific Realism,

... there are no macroscopic bodies (or brains... that could count as persons in the Materialistic sense characterized earlier.<sup>12</sup>

It follows that there are no persons on that planet. And Double concludes, "That planet is Earth."<sup>13</sup> That is, Double claims to have proved that there are no persons on the imaginary planet; and, since the arguments developed in the case of the imaginary planet would apply as well to Earth, it follows that there are no persons on Earth.

## II

Doubles's argument is intriguing, if only for its monumental audacity. Nonetheless, I believe it is largely fallacious, and this for several reasons. First, Double's whole line of attack depends on the unsupported assumption that if persons exist they must conform to either the Cartesian or the Materialist criterion. That is, even if we grant his conclusion that there can be no persons on either the Cartesian or the Materialist model, it does not follow that there are no persons at all--unless it can be shown that there could be no possible model other than these two.

Double makes no effort to show that no other conception of persons is possible; he merely notes that "... over the years there have evolved two major schools of philosophers, the Cartesian and the Materialist."<sup>14</sup> But even if we accept the (not wholly certain) proposition that at the present time the Cartesian and the Materialist schools are the major ones, it does not follow that no other schools could or even do exist. And of course other concepts of personhood do exist that are untouched by Double's arguments.

In particular, Double's rejection of Hume's "bundle theory" seems much too cavalier; and it fundamentally begs the question against Hume. Double gives no reason whatever for doubting that persons as Hume construed them could do the

things persons in fact do. For example, Double tells us, "A person thinks, believes, desires, wills, affirms, denies, dreams, sees colors, wishes, wonders, has emotion, feels sensation, and experiences self-consciousness."<sup>15</sup> With the possible exception of the last-mentioned, there seems to be no reason to suppose that an entity conceived along Humean lines would have any difficulty qualifying as a person. For the sorts of things Double represents persons as doing are precisely the sorts of things Hume represents them as doing. The significant innovation in Hume's position is that he believes all this to be possible without an underlying mental substance. Hume conceives thinking, believing, desiring, etc. as having certain sorts of immediate experience. (Of course, the tenability of Hume's position ultimately turns on whether it is coherent so to conceive these activities.)

But to assert, as does Double, that "By our lights, if Hume is correct, then there is no such thing as the human mind"<sup>16</sup> is to beg the question. For if Hume is correct, and the bundle theory of the self is philosophically sound, then the existence of a human mind would just be the existence of the sorts of sequence of experience which Hume envisions. And so persons would exist; and likewise the human mind. Whatever the merits of Hume's philosophical psychology, more than this airy dismissal is required to refute it.

(I said above that Hume's persons could do all the things Double mentions with the possible exception of possessing self-consciousness. This is not really an exception, however. For if Hume's theory of the self is correct, then consciousness of self would simply be consciousness of the inner experience which constitute that self. And so if anyone were aware of thinking, believing, etc., then that person would be self-conscious.)

Second, Double's argument that there are no persons according to Cartesian criteria seems wholly unsound. As we saw, this argument turns on recent discoveries of neurophysiology, which appear to show that some mental functions are influenced by the bilateral structure of the brain. But this conclusion would not necessarily embarrass Descartes, who after all argued for interaction between mind and body. Of course his theory of the "animal spirits" which were supposed to mediate between mental and physical events differs from the modern physiological account in matters of detail; but actually it parallels the modern picture with surprising accuracy. That is, Descartes pictured the circulation of the animal spirits throughout the nervous system in almost exactly the same way as contemporary science knows nerve impulses to circulate. Thus Descartes believed that mental events were caused by physical events in the brain.

But, it does not follow within Descartes' system that the mind does not exist as an immediately experiencing entity. On the contrary, the physiological discoveries Double mentions are entirely consistent with the existence of a mind or soul in Descartes' sense. True, Descartes held that the soul could and does exist after the

dissolution of the body; and so any evidence that mental experience could not occur in the absence of a functioning nervous system would be fatal to his system. But the evidence of bilaterality cited by Double has no such implication; indeed, it is no more a threat to Descartes than any other indication that mental experiences are--in life--casually dependent on brain function. Certainly the failure of neurophysiology to disclose empirical evidence of a Cartesian mind in no way counts against the existence of such an entity. And so Double has not shown that persons in the Cartesian sense do not exist.

Perhaps ironically, Double's characterization of human beings is practically indistinguishable from Descartes' own account of non-human animals. In Descartes' view, a human being is an amalgam of mental and physical substance; while a non-human animal is a merely physical entity giving the appearance of animation as a consequence of physical causes. This latter description would seem to coincide pretty exactly with Double's account of his fictitious humanoids--and human beings. For Double claims to have ruled out the existence of "... a unifying center of consciousness somehow underlying human mental activity."<sup>16</sup>

Third, Double equates Materialism in general with the much more specific position he calls Scientific Realism. But it is surely possible to accept a fundamentally materialistic position without committing oneself to the radical conclusions Double thinks it necessary to draw. In order to make his position tenable Double requires an argument to the effect that any form of materialism must reduce to Scientific Realism. No such argument is offered; nor, I believe, could a sound one be constructed.

Actually, the conclusion that Double's argument on materialism attempts to establish is not just that persons do not exist, but rather that no matter whatever exist. For he says

The sense-data of oases (and, by parity of reasoning, visual and nonvisual sense-data of all other physical objects) are not caused by the macroscopic trees and pools of water of common sense but rather by bizarre collocations of the theoretical entities of physics, which are the real things that exist independently of experience.<sup>17</sup>

But to accept this claim does not require us to conclude that material objects do not exist at all, but only to conclude that our perception of them is vastly different from an underlying reality which is imperceptible to us. For even if it is true that what exists independently to us. For even if it is true that what exists independently of experience are "bizarre collocations of the theoretical entities of physics," it is also still true that those collocations exist, and so do our--even if misleading--perceptions of them. Whatever the constituents of matter may be, we trip over chairs in the dark! Similarly, bizarre collections notwithstanding, human bodies exist, in just the same way as other material objects. So Double also fails to

establish the non-existence of persons on the Materialist model.

### III

Finally, Double examines the concept of personhood exclusively from the standpoint of metaphysics and philosophy of mind--which are certainly legitimate interests. But, this concept also has moral aspects with broad implications in both theoretical and applied ethics. Approached from this direction the concept of a person determines the moral rights possessed by an entity treated as a person and, also, the moral obligation owed to that entity. These are subjects which Double does not take into consideration; but, before so radical a conclusion is reached as that there are no persons, it seems reasonable to take account of other facets of the concept as well.

For example, an area in which it is essential to understand the concept of a person is the issue of the moral permissibility of abortion. Many who deny that abortion is morally permissible do so because they hold that the fetus is a person, in the moral sense of the word, and therefore, the fetus has a right to life. This right would be violated if an abortion is performed; therefore, abortion is wrong. By contrast, those who support the permissibility of abortion often do so because they hold that the fetus is not a person, in the moral sense; therefore, they argue that no rights are violated by performing an abortion and conclude that a woman has a right to have an abortion if she chooses.

Note that nothing in this dispute necessarily hinges on the acceptance or the rejection of either the Cartesian or the Materialist views in metaphysics and philosophy of mind. A philosopher could hold either position on the moral permissibility of abortion at the same time as holding either position on the philosophy of mind. (And, of course, it is equally possible to hold neither of these two positions on the latter question.) In fact, the discussion of personhood in ethics does not usually turn on issues in metaphysics or the philosophy of mind at all. Rather, the ethical problems seem to revolve around different considerations entirely. For example, in a general overview of the abortion issue, Joel Feinberg has distinguished five criteria of personhood.<sup>18</sup>

Of the five, Feinberg defends the "Actual-Possession Criterion" as best capturing the sense of the concept of personhood. This criterion says that where "c" represents the characteristic(s) of personhood, "... at any given time t, all and only those creatures who actually possess c are moral persons at t, whatever species or category they may happen to belong to."<sup>19</sup> Feinberg defends the Actual-Possession Criterion on the grounds that on this criterion moral personhood

... is conferred by the same characteristics c that lead us to recognize personhood wherever we find it. It is no accident, no mere coincidence, that we use the moral term 'person' for those beings, and only those beings, who

have c.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover,

It is because people are conscious; have a sense of their personal identities; have plans, goals, and projects; experience emotions; are liable to pains, anxieties, and frustrations; can reason and bargain, and so on--it is because of these attributes that people have values and interests, desires and expectations of their own, including a stake in their futures, and a personal well-being of a sort we cannot ascribe to unconscious of nonrational beings.<sup>21</sup>

On this criterion, then, human beings are persons. And notice the close similarity between the list of activities Feinberg offers to that given earlier by Double; this similarity is no mere coincidence, for in both cases the goal was to characterize the concept of a person. And so if entities exist who can perform as Feinberg says, there are persons.

Although Feinberg strongly advocates the actual-possession criterion of personhood, it should be noted for present purposes that any of the others he mentions would serve as well to undermine Double's claim that there are no persons. Suppose, for example, that we accept as adequate the species membership criterion, according to which all and only human beings are persons.<sup>22</sup> It will follow, then, that if there are members of our species, then there are persons. Since, by accepted biological criteria, there are members of the species *Homo sapiens*, it follows that there are persons. The other criteria of personhood discussed by Feinberg would lead to the same conclusion, since there are indisputably entities that possess the characteristics each criterion considers necessary and sufficient for personhood.

This conclusion is reassuring, of course, because it preserves aspects of moral discourse that many philosophers consider indispensable. For any rights-based ethical theory is likely to regard the concept of personhood as crucial: it is precisely because of the intrinsic value accorded persons that our behavior toward them is morally significant. If we were driven to Double's conclusion that persons do not exist, then a major category of philosophical argumentation would cease to exist also. And, of course, there would be those who would be quick to claim that, since there are no persons, there are no moral structures on our treatment of others.

Thus we see that Double's argument is unsuccessful. He attempted to establish a radically counter-intuitive conclusion--that persons do not exist. But if the arguments here developed are at all on target, his argument is wholly unsound; indeed, it is no more than Double-talk.

#### NOTES

1. "There Are No Persons," in *The Intersection of Science Fiction and Philosophy*, ed. Robert E. Myers. Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, c. 1983; pp. 109-118.

2. *ibid.* p. 110
3. *ibid.* p. 111
4. *ibid.* p. 111; *emphasis original.*
5. *ibid.* p. 111; *emphasis original.*
6. *ibid.* p. 112
7. *ibid.* p. 112
8. *ibid.* p. 113
9. *ibid.* p. 113
10. *ibid.* p. 114
11. *ibid.* p. 113
12. *ibid.* p. 116
13. *ibid.* p. 116
14. *ibid.* p. 110
15. *ibid.* p. 111
16. *ibid.* p. 113
17. *ibid.* p. 115
18. Joel Feinberg, "Abortion," in *Matters of Life and Death*, ed. Tom Regan; New York, Random House, 1980; pp. 183-217.
19. *ibid.* p. 197
20. *ibid.* p. 197
21. *ibid.* p. 197
22. *ibid.* p. 191-2