

Multiple Persons And The Problem Of Integrating Them

Joe Barnhart

Rather than debate the question of whether the multiple-personality phenomenon exists, I intend to explore certain important metaphysical and moral consequences predicated on it (or their) existence. In the interest of narrowing the focus, I will presuppose the existence of no disembodied or disincarnate consciousness.

For over a century, the clinical approach to multiples has been that of, first, bringing several – if not all – the alters to the surface. In behavioristic language, this means freeing each alter to become temporarily overt rather than covert or hidden from the observations of the therapist and, in some cases, of fellow multiples of the same body. The second goal of therapy for multiple personalities has been their integration. Later, I will challenge this claim of integration.

In the book *The Self and Its Brain*, Karl Popper in particular develops a metaphysics of what in America would be labeled process philosophy or emergent naturalism.¹ His book *A World of Propensities* expands the thesis that the universe is creative, though this does not imply a cosmic creator or universal designer of the whole.² Human consciousness and intelligence are novelties or emergent qualities of this creative universe. Popper writes:

Some people have found the ideal of emergence of consciousness incredible and ununderstandable ... Although the recreation of consciousness happens every day, I think it is probably as miraculous as the first occurrence of consciousness and that it is almost as difficult to understand – if we *really* want to understand it.³

By *miraculous*, Popper means, not the work of supernatural agents, but the emergence of qualities and novelties that not even an ideal mind could have predicted and explained from past and present states of reality. Relative to the problem of multiple personality, I offer the conjecture that some human organisms create not one person only, but several. In most cases, the human organism appears to make itself into only one conscious, active person; but there is no sound metaphysical or scientific reason for rejecting the conjecture that more than one conscious self could emerge as novelties of a human organism.

The human infant enters the world as a developing body that in time becomes a person.^{4*} According to Eccles, this process takes time and an enormous amount

of work. We are apt to think learning a first language comes easily, but we probably “underestimate the immense experimental effort and intensity of the effort made by a young child in learning how to use the language ...”⁵ Freud has argued that the new id-kid has a difficult time of it even under the best of conditions. Children have to learn not only a language, but the rules and regulations of family and community living. At the same time, they must go through a staggering array of trials and errors in coming to terms with the physical world or floors, walls, sticks, and all sorts of objects that little hands, mouths, and brains are prone to investigate. I offer the conjecture that the development of several selves or alters out of one human organism is probably as “natural” as the development of one self only. That is, the human brain has a powerful structure and propensity for generating so-called dissociative states. Some cultures seem more tolerant of such states or alternate personalities than are other cultures. (I prefer such phrases as “alternative self” and “alter.” The phrase “dissociative identity” carries a pejorative tone).

My thesis is that certain kinds of communities exert profound and relentless pressure on the individual organism to generate and sustain only one self-conscious self. Every community must place some hard restraints on the proliferation of multiples or alters. This social necessity – which in most of the world becomes something of a legal requirement – is the community’s tendency to hold its members accountable for certain overt behaviors. Even in those cultures that encourage the development of multiple selves (or at least highly original personality fugues and mutants) certain severe sanctions are stipulated. For example, human organism A ought not to have sexual relations with organism B because A is married to C, and B is married to D. For the sake of simplicity, let us say that A, B, C, and D has (or *is*) each four distinguishable alters. Marital codes and regulations prohibit A2 from forming a legitimate intimate relationship with, say, B4, since B1 is married to C3. In short, societies are prone to legitimate marriages between human organisms, not between alters or multiples. The various alters of each organism are expected to respect the marital rule. Even in cultures encouraging polygamy, marital codes restrain the alters. The point here is that there is community pressure to treat each organism as if it were one person only.^{6*}

Various cultures have designated the family as more or less one corporate person. The family is held responsible for the actions of all family members. By contrast, contemporary European and American cultures tend to hold the individual alone responsible. But there are limits to this tendency. In cases of one body with several persons, legal and social sanctions tend to hold the single organism accountable and to ignore (legally) the multiples. There are, of course, a few exceptions to this powerful legal tradition. In the first draft of a novel, I have been trying to work out some of the complicated legal and moral implications of treat-

ing each alter as an end in himself or herself and never as a means only. In an actual clinical and therapeutic setting, hard decisions have to be made regarding alters who have a proclivity toward either committing felonies or attempting suicide.^{7*}

It has become almost axiomatic for many therapists to assume that the ideal way to treat multiples is to integrate them. This has always struck me as not only naive but morally questionable. Recently, however, a group of psychiatrists and counselors have successfully persuaded a number of their colleagues to substitute the phrase dissociative identity disorder (DID) for multiple personality (MPD). Though still labeling the phenomenon as a disorder to be treated, they sought to avoid what could become highly charged legal battles. It takes little imagination to foresee that eventually some client might accuse the therapist of committing (or at least attempting) homicide against one or more of the multiples. Fifteen years ago, in another unpublished novel I explored some of the legal and moral implications of *exterminating* one of the multiples – premeditated murder without a corpse.

The clinical literature indicates that counselors and psychiatrists who believed in the reality of MPD believed that the alters were distinctive *persons* rather than merely the diverse *personalities* that most individuals generate. In many cases, therapists talked with the alters and came to know a great deal about them. All attempts to integrate, fuse, or synthesize these distinct persons raise, two fundamental questions, one metaphysical and the other a moral question. First, *can* in fact two or more persons be integrated with or fused into one? Second, if integration does not take place in the therapeutic process, what actually does take place when therapists claim to be integrating the MPD clients – and is what they are doing ethical? I confess that I do not find even plausible the claim that alters can be integrated or blended into one person. Are persons the kind of reality that can be absorbed one into another? It seems more accurate to say that some alters can be extinguished. Therapists perpetrate a disingenuous fiction when they purport to synthesize multiple persons into one only. In my judgment, there is far more truth in Shirley Jackson's novel *The Bird's Nest* than in many of the books and articles advancing the integration or blending model. In her novel, Jackson has one of the MP alters (Elizabeth) say of another, "*She* will think and eat and hear and walk and take baths. Not me. I'll maybe be a part of her, but *I* won't know it – *she* will."

When another character in the novel claims not to comprehend, Elizabeth explains: "Well, when *she* does all the thinking and knowing, won't *I* be . . . dead?"⁸ Jackson is surely correct in viewing the putative integration process as an act of annihilation at best. At worst, it is a kind of psychological cannibalism clothed under a euphemism.

There is little difficulty in understanding some of the reasons for the concentrated attempt of some psychiatrists and therapists recently to switch from mul-

multiple personality disorder (MPD) to dissociative identity disorder (DID). The third edition of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III), published by the American Psychiatric Association, characterized multiple personality as follows:

The essential feature is the existence within the individual of two or more distinct personalities, each of which is dominant at a particular time. Each personality is a fully integrated and complex unit with unique memories, behavior patterns, and social relationships that determine the nature of the individual's acts when that personality is dominant (257).

The article goes on to say that "one or more of the personalities may have reported having talked with or engaged in activities with one or more of the other personalities."

I submit that the description of MPD alters match our ordinary description of *persons*, each with his or her unique memories, behavior patterns, and social relationships. The fourth edition (DSM-IV) drops the phrase "multiple personality" and substitutes "dissociative identity disorder." Unlike the third edition, the fourth makes abundant use of the term "identity" and then defines the identity *disorder* as the "failure to integrate the various *aspects* of identity, memory, and consciousness."⁹ While making no attempt to specify what is meant by an *aspect* of identity, the DSM-IV article on DID does tend to use the phrase "personality states" as equivalent to "identity." How this is to be distinguished from our rather ordinary understanding of "person" is unclear, however, since the article does not openly stipulate that a human organism must have (or be) only one person. Indeed, I find the following quotation from page 484 to be less than illuminating: "Each personality state may be experienced as if it has a distinct personal history, self-image, and identity, including a separate name." I see no reason for using the phrase *as if* in referring exclusively to alters. There is considerable evidence for at least articulating the hypothesis that alters can have their own memories, self-images, and identities. This is not to say their memories, etc., are infallible. At the same time, non-multiple persons can be quite mistaken about details of their own putative memories. Non-multiples who suffer from Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa sometimes mistakenly perceive themselves as much heavier or fatter than they are in fact. Some have even drawn images of themselves as obese. We do not, however, conclude that they are not persons because of their distorted self-images.

The recent shift to the phrase "dissociative identity disorder" may very well prove to be what Imre Lakatos labeled a "degenerative problem shift" that does not add to the empirical content of the cognitive system and, in this case, imports terminology that conceals perhaps a hidden agenda.

Perhaps the most critical problem clinically in the shift from MPD to DID is the assumption that the DID client is not fully a person. This assumption apparently frees the therapist from having to worry about committing homicide. Instead of viewing the client as multiple persons, the therapist can in some respects view the client as not yet a genuine person. At best, the DID client is an interplay of diverse "personality states" that have yet to succeed in forming a genuine person. This approach clearly gives the therapist much more control over the process of transforming the "states" (clusters?) into a full person.¹⁰

There are several more ethical and metaphysical problems in the multiple-personality issue that deserve to be explored in depth. (1) If one of the persons or clusters is to become the so-called core self, what are the criteria for selecting one over its rivals? (2) Is there a tendency to treat one of the more "difficult" selves as a scapegoat whose elimination will presumably serve as a kind of magical purge? (3) In designating a client as MPD rather than DID, will the therapist actually help generate self-conscious mutants that were not there before therapy began? Will the therapist contribute to the client's pretense or role playing, thus fulfilling the "occupational role" expected.¹¹ (4) By contrast, in designating a client as DID rather than MPD, does the therapist deny the rights of persons to be persons because of a concealed presupposition that a human organism can have (or be) only one person? Is this approach a form of ruthless repression rather than therapy?

In conclusion, I submit that the shift to DID gives therapists perhaps better legal protection. It does not however advance the understanding of the complex phenomenon in question. Indeed, the shift may very well be a form of *denial*. To be sure, such denial is quite understandable. The mind-brain problem alone overwhelms us. A fortiori, when faced with multiple persons emerging within, or as functions of, one human organism, we encounter a Pandora's box of metaphysical and ethical problems. Given our need for order and cosmos, the multiple-persons phenomenon does perhaps disturb us – so much so that we label it a *disorder*.

Perhaps philosophers are not the ideal kings of the republic that Plato perhaps imagined. Perhaps, more realistically, philosophers are society's conceptual and cognitive janitors whose task it is to face up to the cognitive messes that others make in pursuing their important, practical tasks. If we are lucky, we can sometimes straighten up some of the conceptual mess. Two philosophical works in particular I would like to praise for their splendid, pains-taking custodial labor are Stephen E. Braude's *First Person Plural: Multiple Personality and the Philosophy of Mind*¹² and Ian Hacking's *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*¹³.

Notes

1. See especially his critique of "preformationism" (*The Self and Its Brain* [New York: Routledge, 1995; Springer-Verlag, 1977], pp. 23-25).
2. Karl R. Popper, *A World of Propensities* (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1995).
3. *The Self and Its Brain*, p. 438.
- 4.* An infant may be treated as if it were a person in so far as possible. Interestingly, the debate among Christians regarding infant baptism and believer's baptism may be seen as an attempt to deal with the question of personhood and full personhood. From a Kantian point of view, infant baptism is the community's attempt to provide the newborn a place within the Kingdom of Personhood. Believer's baptism, by contrast, focuses on the individual's responsibility to take on the duties implied in being a member of that Kingdom.
5. *The Self and Its Brain*, p. 428.
- 6.* According to Judges 7:10-26, when Achan's transgression created great peril for the people of Israel, Joshua ordered the burning of not only Achan, but his sons, daughters, oxen, asses, sheep, and his other possessions. Some biblical scholars view this as an example of "corporate personality."
- 7.* B.F. Skinner offers the following insight: "Two selves may exist in the same skin without conflict until the contingencies conflict ... As Marx and many others have pointed out, the individual is born of society, and his individuality depends upon the coherence of the society which gives birth to them ... Conflicting contingencies give birth to conflicting repertoires of behavior, but they are exhibited by one body, by one member of the human species (*About Behaviorism* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974], pp. 149f).
8. Shirley Jackson, *The Bird's Nest* (New York: Tower Publications, 1967 [1954]), p. 204.
9. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition (DSM-IV) (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), p. 484. Italics added.
10. See "The Myth of the Complete Person," in Mary Vetterling-Braggin, Frederick A. Elliston, and Jane English, eds. *Feminism and Philosophy* (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, & Co.), pp. 277-290.
11. See Irving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1961), pp. 380, 386.
12. Second edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995).
13. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).