



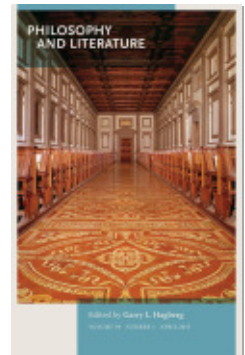
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The Tale Parfit Tells: Analytic Metaphysics of Personal Identity vs. Wittgensteinian Film and Literature

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THE TALE PARFIT TELLS: ANALYTIC
METAPHYSICS OF PERSONAL IDENTITY VS.
WITTGENSTEINIAN FILM AND LITERATURE

Abstract. At the center of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* is nestled a famous short story about a person who uses a teletransporter. Parfit argues that his "thought experiment" shows that "personal identity"—as (analytic) philosophy understands it—doesn't matter. As long as I know that my "self" on Mars is unharmed by the teletransporter, it shouldn't matter to me that I remain on Earth, soon to die. I use Christopher Priest's novel *The Prestige* and the Nolan brothers' film of it to challenge the method and alleged moral of this "branch-line" teletransportation thought experiment, treating it as a work of literature in miniature.

[B]ecause I have shown my hands to be empty you must now
expect not only that an illusion will follow but that you will
acquiesce in it.

—Borden, in *The Prestige*

Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

What has to be overcome is *not* difficulty
of the *intellect* but of the *will*.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions*

"Are you watching closely?"
—Borden's opening line in the film *The Prestige*

I

The last line of Parfit's description of the "branch-line case" of tele-transportation, the very epicenter of his hugely influential thought experiment that famously proposes a radically new view on "personal identity," runs as follows: "[W]hile I stand here speechless, I can see and hear myself, in the studio on Mars, starting to speak."¹ Parfit, notoriously, goes on to argue that the "branch-line" version of me, the "I" in the story, shouldn't/needn't be sad that he is going to die, because he is going to survive—or at least, something is going to happen which is just as good as his surviving.²

He is to all intents and purposes on Mars. This is the radical conclusion that Parfit argues for: that "Personal identity is not what matters" (*RP*, p. 217), and that "Relation-R" (roughly, psychological connectedness) is what matters, and is preserved by "me"³ being on Mars, thus rendering irrelevant the existence of another (shorter-lived) me still on Earth.

Parfit immediately goes on to ask the following question: "What can we learn from this imaginary story? Some believe that we can learn little. This would have been Wittgenstein's view" (*RP*, p. 273). Granted, there is *some* potential support for this claim of Parfit's. One might, for instance, consider Wittgenstein's remark from *The Blue and the Brown Books*:⁴ "[W]ere Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde two persons or were they the same person who merely changed? We can say whichever we like. We are not forced to talk of a double personality." But what I suggest is that actually, we (*including* we Wittgensteinians) can learn something from this imaginary story, but that a philosopher like Wittgenstein would not have "learnt" from the story (and from other stories, movies, etc., that we might profitably bring into alignment or conversation with it) what *Parfit* famously claimed to have learnt and claimed we should learn. As a Wittgensteinian, I think there may well be (different) things that we *can* learn from it. Things ultimately more amenable to what I think would be Wittgensteinian thinking about what it is to be a person; what it is to care about whether or not one is "oneself" going to die (see *RP*, pp. 287–88). I will try to explain this.

Why will I draw on a novel/movie in order to do so? Because these help us richly to see *different ways* in which a thought experiment—a little piece of literature—such as Parfit's may play out. Different possibilities that can free our minds from the rails on which Parfit attempts to place them.

II

At the very end of Parfit's little story, the "me" on Mars starts to speak—to me (as it were). My claim would be: In such communicative acts are people formed. Born, even.

In the general background of my thinking on this stands the philosophical sociology of Dewey and of Mead, and symbolic interactionism. Though it undoubtedly has serious flaws and limitations (partly those exposed by Wittgensteinian ethnomethodology), the Meadian approach does adduce and facilitate a basic understanding of the vast importance (and the real nature) of social interaction, for the formation and continual reformation of the self. We can imagine a conversation happening between the two "me's," turn-taking reasonably and appropriately, one presumes, as they (we) are perhaps starting to do in the final line of Parfit's sci-fi tale.⁵ While he speaks, that is to say, unless we talk across each other, I listen. My claim would be: right there is the disproof of Parfit's moral of the story. As we take turns in conversation, I am first the listener and then the speaker. *You*, then *me*. And further: we become who we are (and in what we say) in such encounters.⁶

Parfit himself perhaps hints (on Earth, I'm "speechless") that the conversation would not necessarily be easy. Why not? Because I am going to die. This is disturbing. The "me" on Mars might well also be disturbed by this. But, presumably, not as much; or at least, not quite in the same way. (For, in roughly Heideggerian terms: one cannot die another's death.)

What might this conversation (which Parfit refrains from picturing) actually look like? At a great distance, and in a relatively public place, it might well be fairly stilted. Imagine if the teletransporter only transported one some yards away, rather than some millions of miles. In that case, the two versions of the self could meet and really talk (and more), almost instantly.

Perhaps they would embrace, one of them offering solace to the other. The other might perhaps declare, "Go live your life in full, for both of us."

This possibility is roughly described, in a somewhat similar case, in the Christopher Priest novel⁷—a marvelous meditation on human doubling remade by Christopher Nolan (to a script by his brother, Jonathan) into an even more philosophically fascinating and relevant movie, *The Prestige*.⁸ But so is another possibility, a possibility of a less pleasant kind. (See especially p. 118 of the script of *The Prestige*, on the first possibility.)

The words I have “quoted” above encapsulate exactly how the magician Borden deals with his impending death—in conversation with Fallon, his secret doppelganger, his secret twin brother. (See especially pp.124–26 and the discussion below, of Angier’s duplication, on the second—less pleasant—possibility.)

The Prestige is a tale of two magicians who are first colleagues, and then rivals. At the end of the story, it turns out that “one” of the two magicians, Borden, is actually two people: two twins pretending to be one person (*almost* as if living as two halves of one person—almost, but, as we shall see, not). This enables him to do all sorts of tricks, such as (most strikingly) the “transported man,” in which the magician appears to move instantaneously from one side of the theater to the other. Near the end of the film, one of the Borden twins is publicly executed. The other lives on—presumably secretly—to take vengeance for the one who died and, perhaps more important, to bring up his daughter/niece. I return to this, below.

The other magician, Angier, to equal and better Borden, eventually gets hold of an actual teletransporter. This allows him to move from one side of the theater to the other instantaneously. But there is a catch: When the teletransporter fires off, it leaves him also, or, if you prefer, a duplicate/replica of him, inside the teletransporter. So far, so very Parfitian. And here is the alternative (less pleasant) possibility that *The Prestige* presents for how to handle such an eventuality: because (at least in part; see below) of his desire that the secret of his teletransporter not to be discovered (which it surely would be if more and more versions of him were alive in the world), Angier kills his other self each time the teletransporter fires off. The first time, by pistol; every successive time, by having the version of himself that remains untransported fall through a trapdoor under the stage and drown. Here is a branch-line case with a vengeance....

What is the point? The point is that we, in part *because* we are through-and-through social creatures (as Wittgenstein, among others, has stressed), living our lives in very significant part through our relationships to others, would surely never be able to have the kind of relaxed attitude to the branch-line case that Parfit recommends. And we should note that the very term “branch-line case” that Parfit picks is prejudicial. Think of the underlying railway metaphor here: A branch line goes away from the main line and does not return to it, does not cross it again. Easily replicated if one “me” is on Mars and the other on Earth. But what if we are both in the same room, after the teletransporter has

done its job? What if the branch line and the main line instantly cross paths again in this way? The film version of *The Prestige* is interested in this question.

At the mathematical limit, at the very moment of teletransportation, it might be possible to do as Parfit recommends: to conceive of the two beings as interchangeable. But as soon as we start to speak to each other (or embrace each other, or seek to dispose of each other, etc.), we are not in any meaningful sense the same person any more. In Parfit's branch-line case, the Earth "me" has to come to terms with dying, while "he," over there on Mars, will live. He has to come to terms with my death, but not in the same sense that I do. I have to come to terms with my death; he has to come to terms with my death.

These are already very different people. Their existential placement with regard to one another, as must and will immediately emerge in their conversation (or in whatever *else* happens between them), differs significantly.

I think that it is excessively convenient (for the case that Parfit wishes to make) that one of us is on Earth and the other on Mars. This is an initial move made by Parfit in his "conjuring trick," which takes place without us even noticing it (see Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*⁹). It seems a perfectly innocuous feature of his little story (his thought experiment) that the teletransportation takes place between Earth and Mars. But, it turns out, *it isn't*. If the teletransporter instead transports—or rather, duplicates—across a theater / across a room, such that the two people who have come from one original then confront each other, the whole situation is quite different. Parfit can ignore the interaction between, and potential competition between, the two "me's" that he depicts, because they are literally worlds apart; but such interaction can't be ignored if they confront each other *in person* at once. An apparently innocuous feature of Parfit's thought experiment turns out to be determinative, and misleading. Strip it away, as the Nolan brothers do, and the whole story changes.

Were we within spitting (or shooting) distance, surely we could not possibly take a relaxed attitude toward what was about to transpire between us. If we are physically present to each other, if our mutual physicality as well as our mutual conversation is foregrounded, as it is in *The Prestige*, then the difference in our personhood cannot be concealed. This is disturbingly (and beautifully) portrayed in the movie by the horror on the face of the Angier who is about to be murdered, by "himself." A limited sense of this emerges in the relevant portion of the movie's script:

The machine sputters out.
 ANGIER IS STILL STANDING BENEATH IT.

ANGIER (confused): It didn't work.

VOICE (voiceover): Yes it did.

ANGIER TURNS...

ANOTHER ANGIER is standing on the chalk hashmark, STEAM rising off his shoulders.

The first Angier lunges for the pistol and levels it at the second Angier.

SECOND ANGIER (horrified): No, wait! I'm the—

BANG! BANG! The first Angier FIRES TWO SHOTS and, grim faced, drops the pistol. SHOCKED. He stumbles back, in a daze, clothes still steaming. (*The Prestige* script, p. 125)

Now, if, in Parfit's scenario—after learning about the branch line—I continue to use the teletransporter, then that seems not so very different from deciding over and over again (as Angier does, in the *Prestige* scenario, for the sake of his trick, for the sake of the obsessive struggle he is engaged in to better Borden) to murder “myself.”

Have I given away the store by continuing to speak simply of “Angier” after the point where he kills his doubled self each time he sets off the teletransporter? Is this enough to entitle Parfit to conclude that the branch lines don't matter? I think not. Each time there is a branch line, there are briefly two Angiers. Then one gets killed by the other. Then there is just (one) Angier again. For convenience we may refer to the surviving Angier, each time, as “Angier.” But this doesn't make what has happened matter any the less, especially perhaps from the point of view of the one killed. It is still something that matters (a lot!). However, Parfit would plainly want to deny that this matters (a lot). Parfit thinks this: Leaving aside the pain of the killing, why am I supposed to care about my death in this circumstance? In the future there will be somebody exactly like me, doing all the things I usually do, and so on. In order fully and satisfactorily to answer Parfit here, I need to make use of the importance to us of our sociality and our individuality.

I think that the Nolans' presentation of teletransporting is far more

finely attuned, psychically, than Parfit's. We see this attunement in the look of horror on the second Angier's face. We can also hear it in the poignancy of his last words: "No, wait! I'm the—." What was he going to say, had he not been cut off? Surely, "— real Angier!" The poignancy, of course, is that he is not *the* real Angier. Because, roughly: they *both* are.

When Tesla, the creator (in *The Prestige*) of the teletransporter, has realized that his electric teletransporter is working, but through a "branch-line" method that *duplicates* the original, as they stand amid a load of identical versions of Angier's hat, Tesla tells Angier not to forget to take his hat with him. Angier asks which is his real hat. Tesla replies, "They are *all* your hat" (*The Prestige* script, p. 92). The movie version of *The Prestige* expertly explores the horror, the terrible turn in events, that may follow from duplication, not merely of hats but of *human beings* (specifically of Angier, and in a way, of course, of Borden, too). Whereas Parfit seems to think such duplication simply a kind of irrelevant accident.

Henceforth, if both Angiers survived, they would be in absolute competition—unless they cooperated, a growing army of Angiers, and somehow managed to keep hidden and fed and so on. This cooperative possibility, not considered by the story, would allow us perhaps more of a sense that the other is another "me"—as perhaps in Aristotle's notion of one's friend as another self. However, this remote possibility, while potentially interesting, obviously doesn't amount to what Parfit is looking for. (We shall return to this possibility in section 3 below, in connection with what one might think is a flaw in the story: the lack of consideration of such possibilities.)

The term "second Angier" that the film script reaches for at this point is arbitrary. (It is simply a matter of which one appears first on camera, as the scene is filmed.) One is not first and the other not second. They are equal—though that is far from making one of them disposable! You can't simply *replace* one with the other. Parfit's view is tantamount to saying that you can. His attitude toward human doubles is rather like the attitude Borden manifests toward the little tweeting birds that he kills every night in one of his tricks, pretending that the "identical" bird that he then reveals as alive is numerically identical to the bird that he made disappear—and that he in fact killed. Angier wants to take a similar attitude toward *his* doubles—but the toll of killing himself over and over is in fact grave.

Each Angier thinks, it seems, that only one of him is real. Parfit says one is just as good as the other, so you only need one of them. Their

mistakes are complementary, alarmingly close cousins. (Parfit seems to have inadequate grounds for thinking that one Angier was doing something *wrong*, in hastening the departure from this mortal coil of his so-called “branch-line” counterpart.) Both Angier and Parfit miss what I think the film itself indicates, and that I suggest a Wittgensteinian would/should surely conclude: namely, that the two Angiers are both equally real, equally authentic inheritors of the Angier mantle, and there is no decent case for one of them being subject to the other, still less eliminable at will. They are two people, and we can see this in the fact that they converse (and more!) with each other.

If one looks closely at the crucial sequence in the film where we finally see Angier duplicating himself for the first time, it is I think fairly clear that Angier simply does not know what he is going to do if the machine works and duplicates him. He has a pistol ready, but this is in case the machine produces a wraith or monster or in some other way harms him, when and if it works. He is not expecting to use the pistol on “himself.” This indecision fits with the Wittgensteinian critique that (I suggest below) the film makes of the general tendency, present even in the very magicians who exploit it, not to want to see what is in front of one’s very eyes. It is *likely*, in fact, I think, that Angier deliberately represses thinking about what is going to happen next, that he doesn’t *want* to see the future that he is creating, such that, when he suddenly stands facing “himself,” only then does the horror dawn on him. Only then do both Angiers think of the pistol, to which one of them is standing nearer than the other.

The Prestige explores in a sensitive way the psychological pressure of such repeated splitting (and killing). After the first time, the one who is to be killed certainly knows what is about to be done to him. In the end this repeated action becomes, arguably, the main topic of the film. (But Parfit deliberately suppresses the issue, I contend, in *his* little narrative.)

This point is explicitly explored, retrospectively, in (the remaining) Angier’s last moments alive, as he contests Borden’s claim that he, Borden, paid a heavier price during his life than Angier did, for his art:

ANGIER: Do you want to see what it cost me?
You didn’t see where you are, did you? Let me show you.

Angier slumps to the floor as he tries to reach for the lantern. He can’t get his hand to obey him.

ANGIER (cont.): It took courage to climb into that machine every night...

INT. UNDER THE STAGE—EVENING—FLASHBACK

A drowning tank, identical to the one we have already seen.

A blind stagehand sits behind it, smoking.

ANGIER (voiceover): Not knowing if I'd be the Prestige [the successful flourish at the end of a magic trick— in this case, the “transported man” appearing]....

Suddenly, a trap door flashes open as Angier falls from the stage door and SPLASHES into the tank. The lid snaps shut.

ANGIER (voiceover) (cont.): Or the man in the box...

Angier pounds on the glass [of the drowning tank], frantic. The blind stagehand continues smoking. Oblivious. (*The Prestige* script, pp.125–26)

If we can successfully imagine the kind of scenario depicted by Parfit and by the Nolans, then we can see that the more attuned and intelligible and human line to take (than Parfit's—let alone than Angier's) is that the duplicate person immediately becomes a consequentially different person. One of them is slightly closer to the pistol than the other; or one of them is taking a bow while the other drowns. Their lives immediately, radically, diverge.

It seems then that Parfit's famous, boldly philosophically and ethically revisionist take on his own tale risks a kind of emotional illiteracy/unintelligence. It is all too helpful to him that his little tale ends when it does. Had it not ended there, he would have had to consider properly how the “me” on Mars feels about this situation, and I suspect that the answer would be: not good.

The series of murders takes a terrible psychical toll on Angier. It carries a huge cost that Borden doesn't see (because he doesn't really want to see it), as noted above. And we should also ask: Why exactly doesn't Borden *want* to see this? In my view, because the life of *Borden*, as latterly that of Angier, has been broken by the secret that he (they) has (have) to keep. Because of this secret, Borden loses *both* his women, one to suicide. The loss also comes because of the coldness with which Borden maintains the secret, the unfeelingness of each of his halves toward the wife or mistress he does not love—even after seeing how Angier lost the same mistress to him for the same reason!

The Prestige is in that sense a *tragedy* of obsession, of repeated, predictable failure. Borden thinks he has won, at the end. But he has lost a

very great deal, in “winning.” If he allowed himself to see what Angier’s secret had cost Angier, Borden would find it much harder to avoid seeing what his secret had cost *him(-self)*; and that might even, say, drive him insane with grief, rather than leaving him feeling the winner. He has won through seeing through his final illusion, his ultimate trick, practiced against Angier, of one twin dying and the other surviving to take revenge on Angier and take back his daughter. His final goal is to reclaim his daughter from Angier, which he does successfully, and in a powerful scene just before the film’s close he reveals himself to her; this ultimate trick, with Borden himself as “the prestige,” was performed for her benefit—and for Angier’s, and for ours. But his self-satisfaction in victory rather occludes from him, I think, the emotional and relational disaster that was his life, prior to that point, and the cost incurred for everyone else other than his surviving self and his daughter.

Of this range of possibilities/likelihoods, the possible terrible consequences of having a replica, terrible consequences that Borden and Angier seek to block from themselves but that the Nolans make visible, we get in Parfit’s little tale virtually no sense. Had the conversation between the two “me’s” developed at all, I think Parfit’s moral to it would already have been undermined. Parfit doesn’t offer us the conversation, which surely might continue in some fashion to the moment that the Earth “me” dies. This is to omit the most telling part of the narrative, the most important part of the enquiry.

But now—having seen *The Prestige*—we can imagine it. So we can, I think, undercut Parfit’s conclusion.

III

We can also go one step further, by reflecting on something in the plot of the movie version of *The Prestige* that looks *prima facie* like a serious flaw, once one notices it: Why didn’t Angier just use the Tesla machine *once* only, and create an exact duplicate of himself, and use it (him) in a “transported man” illusion, just as Borden used his twin?

Part of the answer is that Angier is so obsessed with *bettering* Borden’s magic trick that he wants to do it for real, to transport himself, in a way that Borden cannot rival. Every night, every time. Thus he would not be content merely to copy—to duplicate—Borden’s trick, by creating and using a permanent twin. He imagines the teletransporter as the ultimate way of being the greater magician—of really transporting

himself in an instant from here to there. (Thus he calls his trick “the *real* transported man.”)

But, as indicated earlier, I think that the answer in part is also that Angier has a horror of his doppelganger, a fear of *it* (of him) as a rival. I think that we, the film’s viewers, do too. That we retain a clear folk fear of the double/doppelganger—see, for instance, Daphne du Maurier’s *The Scapegoat* or Dostoyevsky’s *The Double*—has surely something to do with the enormous implicit value we place upon our own individuality and the fear of it being undermined by someone who is *just* like us and yet somehow not (like) us. The double may also function as an anticipation of, or figure for, more or less schizophreniform delusion, as an autoscopic premonition of our own possible loss of control or internal doubledness or splitness. (We never know if Dostoyevsky’s Golyadkin has a double or is undergoing a complete mental breakdown, like Hermann and his apparent double in Nabokov’s *Despair*.)

Don’t we intuitively agree, and rightly so, with Tesla, that there is something deeply wrong about this duplicating teletransporter machine? That it should not be used, that it should be destroyed? (The same is true, I suggest, of the Parfit “branch-line” teletransporter; there is something uncannily and profoundly wrong, both in the doubling itself and in the grave hastening of the end of my life, which corresponds to and enables the beginning of existence for my double on Mars.)

I think this is also why many of us fail to notice this apparent plot flaw. We don’t particularly *want* to see it; we don’t want to think that there is / could be a potentially, relatively harmless use of the Tesla teletransporting device that Angier has: if he created a permanent double for himself to copy Borden’s trick. (This “not wanting to see” is, in Wittgenstein’s view, the central problem of philosophy as a practice; witness the epigraphs to this paper, and see also *PI*, pp. 65–67, and Joel Backstrom’s essay, “Wittgenstein and the Moral Dimension of Philosophical Problems”¹⁰) Wittgenstein’s aim is to get each of us “to do something you don’t want to do.”¹¹ This is the real meaning, too, of Wittgenstein’s seminal insight that philosophical problems are really problems of the will, not of the intellect. We don’t really want to see this; nor, apparently, does Angier.

For, after all, the fear of the uncanny creation of the double, the fear of the other as a rival, is, as already intimated, not merely irrational, either. For what if it were the other, not me, who wanted always to be “the prestige,” to be the one getting the applause? (Angier had already experienced this deeply dissatisfying turn of affairs when his body double took the applause in the early version of “the transported man.”) What if

the other turned against you, as actually happens of course in the scenario that the film offers us? (See the section of script quoted above; and also the scene, earlier in the film, in which the duplicated cat immediately chases in a decidedly unplayful manner after its double, the first time that Tesla uses the machine to successfully transport a living creature.) How could one insure against such possibilities? Only by virtue of deep faith in a pact, like the one Borden has with his twin.

Borden's double is his twin, his "other half"; Angier's double appears to him as a threat, a rival personage; this in a certain sense demonstrates how different one's relationship with one's Parfittian duplicate would be from one's relation to oneself. The murderous rivalry between the two magicians is echoed in a macabre fashion in the murderous rivalry between the two Angiers. Borden eventually triumphs, in a way (though see below), because "he"—his twins—cooperate so seamlessly that they become almost as if one person (almost), such that the Borden who is executed (because of Angier's actions) is fairly untroubled about his death. Though *not*, I think, as untroubled as Parfit would have it: He certainly isn't indifferent to his death. It is still his death.

Such expressions as "Borden and his twin brother" are therefore actually rather misleading. Borden, very roughly, has *one* life; the twin brothers share, impossibly, one life. This is the unbelievable sacrifice, so deep that we (the film's audience) don't even think of it as a possibility until it is revealed to us, as noted above. "We don't *want* to see it": In the words that Borden uses to Angier early on in the film, gazing in awe at the Chinese magician who pretends his whole life that he is a cripple, so that he can fool people into believing his tricks (since they presume he is physically incapable of carrying them off): "Total devotion to his art. Utter self-sacrifice" (*The Prestige* script, p. 21). In Tesla's words to Angier, while trying to persuade him (and knowing that he will fail) not to use the teletransporting machine: "Mr. Angier, the cost of such a machine—" [Angier:] "Price is not an object." [Tesla:] "Perhaps not, but have you considered the *cost*?" (*The Prestige* script, p. 55). One must admire the willpower required to pay such costs, to make such *self-sacrifices*; and one ought to feel too a certain dismay or horror at it. A sense of alienation from it, and from the horribly alienating effects that living it can have.

But, and this is crucial: the pact between the Bordens is agreed early in life by the twins. Can one agree to a pact with (in) oneself before splitting? Surely not. For it doesn't mean anything to pretend to make a pact with a being *that doesn't exist yet*. For a pact is a contract, a deal

with two existent parties. Once the splitting into the two “lines” has occurred, one (which one?) has to start afresh. Parfit seems to miss this; he assumes that the two “me’s” are in fundamental, relevant respects the same. But I have argued that the very act of splitting irrevocably means a fresh start, for two people, two inheritors of the same person. One cannot assume that the two Angiers would form a pact—as the two Bordens, brought up together, did, as a deliberate act. Angier himself cannot assume this.

So this neglected aspect of the film’s plot is in fact, once one thinks it through, yet a further strike against Parfit’s philosophy. Parfit’s claim that the relationship of the replica to me is “as good as ordinary survival” is seriously problematic. I would claim that, for ordinary survival to exist, my replica would have to be me *and* there would have not to be any other competitors for this title (since, given the value we place upon individuality, a situation where there are two or more of me would not be as desirable as ordinary survival). This means that the branch-line case cannot be seen as Parfit would like us to see it, as not producing enduring problems for those who can master their intuitions as he believes we ought to master them.

One could counter this by saying that Borden’s life shows that I needn’t be right in thinking this. One can have two “me’s” and this can be a good thing, *if* one’s life’s project is (for example) to be a great magician with a great trademark trick such as “the transported man.” But I would counter by saying, first, that this ignores the terrible cost, which Borden himself does not really allow himself to see, of his life as doubled (as noted above; and I develop this point in section 7). Second, Angier’s terror at his own double may itself be based on just the kind of worries that I am bringing out in this paper. Indeed, Angier’s actions bring out a frightening possibility that the teletransporter branch-line case is already pregnant with.

IV

Now consider the following possible objection to my argument thus far: “In saying that the two Angiers are both the real Angier (just like the teletransported hats), you seem to be violating the conventions of identity talk that Parfit both exploits (by using them to argue that two different people can’t be one and the same person) and tries to undermine (by getting us to see that, if identity talk makes no sense in these circumstances, then we might separate issues of identity from

issues of what Parfit sometimes calls “survival,” and give more weight to the latter). *Do you think that two people can be one and the same person or not?*”¹²

My answer is this: I make a crucial distinction between “the real Angier” and “the same (Angier).” I think that Parfit thinks that because there is no *one* real Angier, then, as far as what matters goes, they are the *same* (hence his emphasis on psychological connectedness/continuity, and on one surviving, regardless of whether one’s “extra copy” survives or not). I aim thoroughly to undermine that inference.

So: It’s not that I think, paradoxically, that both Angiers are *the* real Angier. It’s rather that I think that each is just as much the real Angier as the other. And: I think that as soon as there are two of them, then they are not *the same person*. I aim to press the latter point against Parfit, moving on from the end of what he tells us in his little tale to what we can learn from the more extended story in *The Prestige*.

This does not commit *me* to any philosophical revisionism vis-à-vis “personal identity.” Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasizes that, when we reach sufficiently strange borderline or novel cases, our “intuitions”—our very concepts—gradually give out.¹³ That’s right; but it doesn’t deprive us of being able to connect with such cases the kinds of considerations that Wittgenstein (rightly) brings to bear, again repeatedly, to emphasize the sociality of our minds and ourselves, the centrality to our very being of who we are *in relation to others*. So the novel situation where there are two “me’s” turns into just a new testing ground for that centrality.

That is what Wittgensteinians are likely to learn from Parfit’s scenario.

V

Parfit seems, we might say, to ignore or underplay the importance of both relationality and individuality (including “ipseity,” the sense of individual identity or selfhood) in our culture. As Jerry Goodenough argues in “Can Value Be Duplicated?”¹⁴ if being an individual *has* a value, then something vital *is* lost if I am replaced by a duplicate and something is *also* lost if I survive *with* a duplicate. Parfit wants for ethical reasons to weaken the sense of the first-person individual that we have. Throughout the central, epochal section of *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit talks about our being able to give “an *impersonal* description” (emphasis in original) of the world, one that could describe the nature of our experiences but without “claiming they are had by a subject of experiences” (*RP*, p.225). But I cannot see that we could do this without

omitting or overlooking much of value. Parfit thinks that there would be no loss if the sense of the first-person individual were weakened, but rather an inevitable (alleged) improvement in altruistic concern; but I can't help feeling that there *is* a loss.

Why? Because being an individual—and being just the individual we are, emerging in relation to others (even if those others might from a certain point of view loosely be described as... ourselves)—has an important and enduring value for us. (Though this is not to commit oneself either to the political philosophy of liberalism or to a controversial individualism; it is rather simply to acknowledge a deep feature of our social being. We find ourselves only in community; but *what* we find in community remains *ourselves*: beings that are individual as well as “communitarian” and thoroughlygoingly social.)¹⁵

There is a huge difference between “me” on Mars and me on Earth—a difference whose phenomenology Parfit never burrows into or explores, and which in fact he deliberately aims to undermine. The very conclusion for which he argues is undermined by *what* his argument aims to undermine. His claim is disproved by his very revisionism. *He* begs the question, while the question is answered already by the different feelings of the two protagonists. In these, they are different people.

Someone might want to defend Parfit at this point by citing Mark Johnston's *Surviving Death*,¹⁶ which includes an extended dialogue with Parfit (and like-minded philosophers of personal identity) that is both sympathetic and critical. Johnston argues that we can survive death (if we are good) by being reborn in, living on in, the values of others. I broadly agree, but that doesn't make otiose our “personness” now. Johnston offers us a real philosophical consolation. But neither he nor Parfit eliminates, neutralizes, or even lessens very much the sense of who I am and who I become in relation to others and in conversation (and more) with them, whereby Parfit's revisionist claims based on the teletransporter/branch-line case are, I have argued, quite hopeless.

VI

What would Parfit himself say to these criticisms of his views? The question isn't just hypothetical. I've asked him, and his answer informs various aspects of this paper (see especially note 3). Given his avowed revisionism, he would probably be thoroughly unmoved. He might see these criticisms simply as a restatement of the very moral intuitions that

he thinks we should overcome.¹⁷ He would thus perhaps see the present piece as lacking in arguments, or as not offering reasons.

Parfit would perhaps think that he has covered the worries that I have raised, through the points he makes about what he takes to be “the true theory”—i.e., his theory, which would give up the intuition that the self who is going to die on Earth should be bothered by this, in the branch-line case—being hard to believe. But once again, this raises questions about the status of the intuitions that are so hard to dislodge. If the intuitions are just plain wrong, then Parfit deserves at the very least some acceptable account as to why they are so hard to dislodge, why these intuitions (as opposed to other possible ones) are so embedded in our culture, etc.

Perhaps we can start to see why, once we consider the points made salient by *The Prestige*. We can start to see, that is, *why* these intuitions are *not* dispensable/overcomeable, except at a most drastic cost. *The Prestige*, by offering us some extraordinary, perhaps conceivable, external perspective to our linguistic practices of personhood, helps to make clearer the nature of what is internal to those practices. What we perhaps cannot see, because it is too close to us to be visible, now starts to become visible.

I think that, if Parfit responded to my critique as I have suggested here that he would, his response would evidence his unwillingness to consider the possibility that philosophers may need to broaden their canon of what can be counted as arguments or reasons (a possibility that, following Wittgenstein and Cavell, we can and should appreciate). Or that philosophers should be willing to consider things that are not arguments or reasons; that philosophers should be willing to learn from film and literature. Or at least this: that if philosophers themselves adduce literature—if they tell tales of their own—then they need to be ready to consider the possibility that those tales may not tell the tales (or have the morals) that they want them to. Such is, I think, true of Parfit’s branch-line case. It already veers in a direction that Parfit himself doesn’t welcome, once one starts to think it through. That direction is only accentuated, and developed, by the wonderful tales told at length by Priest and by the Nolans.

The way that Parfit, unlike many moral philosophers (and unlike nearly all non-Utilitarians, in my experience), is openly willing at times to be bluntly revisionistic is refreshing. But the concomitant and grave risk he thus runs is of losing touch with our emotionality, our relational sociality, what we call our humanity. He runs the risk of losing touch,

for instance, with the way our individuality is utterly bound up with our spatial position, our conversational placement, and what we can hope for—for ourselves as well as for others.

Finally, Parfit might respond that, even if I am right in my thinking, I can hardly hope to have established it, as against him, via film and literature; for he might maintain that the tale he tells is a thought experiment rather than a short story.¹⁸ The point of a thought experiment as practiced by analytic philosophy is to have all the variables under control, so that one single point can be established. How could that point be refuted by a work of art?

But, as I have already intimated, one point of literature and film is to show that, however much one thinks one has the variables under control, they virtually always creep back in, on deeper reflection, to affect in unexpected ways the point to be established. They always remain, as one might put it, *variable*. Parfit's tale attempts to cut off the experiment at the point where we imagine what the "me" on Mars would think. A good short story, by contrast, might end at the same point, but it might aim instead to make those unmentioned thoughts of the "me" on Mars pregnant in what is said about me on Earth; to make them unavoidable, even *as* they are not mentioned.

If a short story contains all the variables that a thought experiment tries to control or put out of play, a novel or a feature film gives free reign to those variables, and allows them to develop and influence the single point from multiple angles.

And this is precisely what we find in the current case. *The Prestige* is a scintillating and disturbing meditation on doubling. The movie version of *The Prestige* has a purer sense of doubleness than the novel from which it was adapted. In the movie, Parfitian teletransportation occurs over and over again, producing doubles each time (and each time, one Angier swiftly murders the other), whereas in the book the human being is not doubled; the untransported version merely becomes an inert body. However, we should note the following: Priest's novel in one respect is closer to exploring Parfit's branch-line case than the Nolans' movie is. For, in the novel, there is one crucial time when the teletransportation occurs (see Priest, pp. 302–5) when the man to be transported (Angier) partially duplicates, such that the version of him left untransported becomes ill and has a death sentence of a few months hanging over him—just as in Parfit.

The Prestige offers, I believe, a lovely analogue to the attractions of metaphysics/philosophy, as Wittgenstein sees (and aims to cure) these.

As Cutter, the magicians' assistant, puts it at the start of the film: "You're not really looking [to see how the trick was carried out]; you don't want to know. You want to be fooled" (*The Prestige* script, pp. 3–4). This is very much Wittgenstein's attitude to our more-or-less willful acquiescence in the conjuring tricks of metaphysics.¹⁹ Wittgenstein consistently sees an analogy between magic and metaphysics, between prestidigitation and philosophy (except philosophy undertaken according to "our method"). I think he might well have welcomed the subtle uncovering from the inside, and (if you will) the deconstructive criticism of the attractive but dubious "deconstructive" Parfitian philosophy of personal identity, that the Nolans pull off in *The Prestige*.

Wittgenstein can be compared to the debunker of magic tricks; crucially, to a debunker of the audience's willing complicity in the tricks and desire to believe. Wittgensteinians dare to attempt to show that, and how such tricks are nothing but the dirty little secret that lies at the heart of them, combined with our willingness to see through them to this secret: "Compare the solution of philosophical problems with the fairy tale gift that seems magical in the enchanted castle, and if it is looked at in daylight is nothing but an ordinary bit of iron."²⁰ No wonder, then, that Wittgensteinians are widely disliked in philosophy; for who, really, deep down, *doesn't* want to believe that the emperor is wearing clothes?

VII

To sum up what I have undertaken: In this paper, a work (or two works) of film/literature, the Nolans' and Priest's *The Prestige*, has been used to challenge the method and alleged moral of Parfit's famous branch-line teletransportation thought experiment. By treating Parfit's little tale as a story, a (fragment of a) work of literature, we have seen how it need not have the moral that Parfit alleges for it. The Nolans' version of *The Prestige* combats Parfit directly; the Nolans answer Parfit.

It is striking, for instance, that the film of *The Prestige* presents a situation that is almost exactly parallel to that envisaged in Parfit's famous story. (In Priest's novel the parallel is, on balance, less striking.) In the film, the only departure from Parfit is that it is not clear that one of the duplicates is fated to die young. (They never live long enough for us to find out, for they are all immediately killed by the other survivor.) In Priest's novel, the duplication (i.e., teletransportation) process produces simply one unchanging corpse and one survivor. The only

time duplication produces an extra live human being is when Borden interrupts the procedure midflow, and then one of the products is a kind of wraith, and the other a normal survivor but with reduced body weight who has a built-in death-date from then on. (Of course, this last feature *does* strikingly echo Parfit, as explicated above.)

In other words: one of the changes that the Nolans choose to make to Priest's fascinating novel is to bring the story, on balance, into more direct "alignment" with—and thus into more direct competition with—Parfit's story. Clearly, when one reads the novel and sees the film, the film especially is intended to engage critically in a direct conversation with—and, I have suggested, to undermine the would-be moral of—something awfully like Parfit's story. (Am I claiming that the Nolans must actually have read Parfit? Either they have read [or otherwise encountered secondhand] Parfit's ideas, or this is a remarkable case of "great minds think alike"—except, of course, that the film, in my opinion, engages willy-nilly in a *critique* of Parfit, such that it ends up *not* thinking alike to him, after all...).

In passing, we might also say that these thoughts of mine have *en passant* helpfully exemplified how film may sometimes be *better*, on balance, than literature at posing challenges to established philosophical ideas. This possibility gives a new impetus to the thought that there is something fake, something just plain mistaken, about the "high art" claim, sometimes made even today, that if books are made into films, the films are invariably the inferior artworks—in part, because film can sometimes better convey lived human realities, because (unlike literature) it consists largely of people (actors, etc.) doing things.²¹ But in part, it is simply a matter of happenstance: we have to look and see, on a case-by-case basis, whether a given film or novel is better at making or challenging some particular philosophical case.

Much (though not all) of the reason why *The Prestige* is, in my view, an even more satisfyingly philosophical film on balance than *The Prestige* is a philosophical novel is *not* to do with specifically filmic techniques but rather with the nature of the (substantial) changes that were made to the narrative in the scriptwriting and editing. Priest's novel at certain points perhaps thematizes more beautifully the element of will that is required to overcome delusion, as Wittgenstein famously emphasizes in philosophy: thus my epigraphs to this paper.

As indicated above, the real problem in *The Prestige*, as in Wittgenstein, is that we *want* to be deceived; we willingly acquiesce in the conjuring trick, whether practiced by a metaphysician or a magician (or a

filmmaker).²² But the Nolans' film (and I have probably only scratched the surface of its many thoughtful thematic and philosophic subtleties) is ultimately, on balance, the more impressive (broadly Wittgensteinian) "therapeutic" work, in terms of its content and the actual work that it does. For its delicate and detailed exploration of the philosophy of personal identity is potentially transformative—and a hammer blow against the hugely influential tale that Parfit tells.

Moreover, one might now remark more explicitly on the parallels between prestidigitation and filmmaking, and dwell further on the intrinsic manipulative effects of cinema for which Christopher Nolan seems to have particular acuity and liking. (In this connection, *The Prestige* fits both smoothly and strikingly into the sequence of philosophical masterpieces that includes *Memento* and *Inception*.) For instance, Nolan is clearly interested in the willingness of the filmic audience to be taken in by the performance of Christian Bale, who plays the part of both Borden twins to great effect; anecdotally, I have heard of hardly anyone who guessed Borden's secret before it was revealed to Angier and audience alike in a marvelous "prestige" moment just before the film's end. (See my earlier discussion of our failure to spot Borden's secret sacrifice of one life shared between two. Of course, the irony is that the two Borden *are*, mostly, played by one and the same actor, sometimes intercut using contemporary film-editing methods; and the same for the various Angiers.)

In this way Nolan may be likened to a magician.

One fails to see through the trick around which Borden has built his life, even though there are innumerable clues; this failure is mirrored in the film itself by the inability of Angier to see through Borden's trick or guess his secret, and by the way in which Borden cannot see through Angier's dual identity (as Lord Caldwell as well as Robert Angier). *And yet we still don't see*. Moreover, they both "survive" death because they are both (in the end) doubled (Angier via the Tesla machine)—and yet neither suspects the other of doing so.

In other words: Even though they share essentially the same secret, Borden and Angier do not guess each other's. They don't *want* to believe/see that they are not as unique (in their doubledness) as they think they are. Thus, they are all too willing to believe the other's secret diaries—revelations of the soul, but *intended* (in this case, in each case) to deceive.

Moreover, neither even wants to know the other's remaining, magical secret at the one moment when he actually gets the chance to know it;

when he is directly offered it. Angier turns down the chance to know the secret of “the transported man” when Borden offers it to him while in jail; while, at the film’s very end, Borden turns down the chance to know the secret of “the new transported man.” He doesn’t want to see the “prestige” materials. Nor, as Cutter says to us in the film’s final lines, in voiceover, do we. We didn’t want to think about what Angier’s “rehearsal space” is for (too unpleasant: the dead products of those teletransportations, assembled together; what Parfit, too, doesn’t want us to see or dwell on).

“You want to be fooled,” Cutter repeats to us. Cutter himself, of course, doesn’t want to see, either, and doesn’t guess Angier’s secret or doubledness. (While the deliberately chosen blind stagehands are a reminder of this “blindness” that we all willfully share.) He is speaking to us at the end—as Borden was at the start. Borden’s whisper at the very opening of the film, “Are you watching closely?” (*The Prestige* script, p. 1) signals clearly to us that this is a film about watching films closely, and being able to really see them—in spite of our urge not to (see *PI*, p. 109). It signals this to us—provided we are not already too caught up in the desire to be fooled.

Of course, we as audience are now empowered to overcome this desire on our part not to see. And thus, the crucial difference between magicians and (philosophical) filmmakers—a difference that brings filmmakers like Nolan into close alignment with therapeutic philosophers like Wittgenstein—is that by the end of the film, one has been put in a position to see how everything of consequence has been revealed, made available to one’s understanding. One isn’t left stuck in a position of willed nonseeing; rather, one is enabled to see the world aright through the film (by coming to “see through” the film, as the film ultimately intends). *The Prestige* helpfully draws attention to our desire not to see. Nolan is interested in how the philosophical filmmaker can thus grow his viewer’s autonomy by drawing the viewer’s attention to her own desires to trap herself, and not to see—much as Wittgenstein seeks to help midwife a truer autonomy on the part of his reader, an autonomy all the more powerful because of its self-aware emergence from the myriad temptations of heteronomy.

VIII

In conclusion, we can say this: The film enables us to see what the Bordens and Angiers don’t really want to see, in not wanting to look

at what a horror story they have made of their lives (surely on balance more than a triumph); and what their women certainly don't want to see. Though in fact it is *they*, going on a painful "journey" that turns out to involve having to see this, who perhaps (be-)come closest to being role-models for the realizers of true philosophical insight (Sarah in particular; at p. 99 of *The Prestige* script, Sarah says to Borden, "I know what you *really* are, Alfred!"). And *we* don't want to see, either. But: nothing is hidden, if only we can learn how to see what is before our eyes. What Borden and Angier don't want to see is this: that the two Borden are in fact crucially, definitively different from one another: one loves Sarah, the other loves Olivia. That the two Angiers, each time the Tesla machine is fired up, are crucially, definitively different from one another: one is in a position to kill the other. And, to top it off: that Borden and Angier are actually the closest the film gives us to true doppelgängers. *They are so alike* that they can't bear to see this; each is horrified by the other.

This likeness, which I have developed as a theme during this paper, goes beyond their mutual utter devotion to their art, and their concomitant obsession goes beyond even their doubleness and mutual unsuspectedness to the point of both losing their wives to death. (Borden accidentally kills Angier's wife; Borden's wife kills herself because she can't bear his Jekyll-and-Hyde relationship to her.) Both sequentially lose the same mistress. (Olivia leaves Angier because of his coldness in offering her to Borden as an assistant in order to trick him, and she leaves Borden because of his coldness over his wife's suicide.)

Their similarity is the great hidden theme of the film. We realize early on that Borden and Angier are in respects alike, of course, despite their many superficial differences and their mutual hatred; what we don't suspect until we are gradually forced to face it is that they are, in the end, surprisingly (and we resist seeing this) the best model the movie has to offer for what it would be truly to have a doppelgänger. To say it again: they are arguably more akin to each other, in the end, in their denial and their destruction of their own lives and each other's, than the Borden are to one another or than the repeated Angier pairs are to one another. This is a secret that we can learn. It flagrantly cuts against the assumptions that Parfit marshals, underlying his claim that the branch-line case shows us that something as good as survival—that both Angier and Borden in their different ways have in the film, even as their doubles die—is quite good enough. We might even say, instead, that the spirit of Angier lives in the surviving Borden twin. However, this

is a miserable form of survival; a form dependent on a failure (on both their parts) to live decently, a failure to understand the deepest aspects of oneself and one's relation to others, a failure to see.

Parfit thought that Wittgenstein wouldn't have had time for science fiction stories as guides to philosophy. On the contrary, it is arguably Wittgensteinian philosophers, such as myself, Stephen Mulhall, and Stanley Cavell, who have done more than any others to show the relevance of such stories (including *The Prestige* and Mulhall's great analyses of *BladeRunner* and other works) to philosophy. But this relevance operates very differently from the way that Parfit foregrounds. Indeed, I hope to have shown here that—when we approach Parfit's own writing in a spirit that tries to take seriously and imaginatively inhabit the human living that his famous branch-line case snapshots—we end up with conclusions very different than his, conclusions that fundamentally undermine those that he wants us to read off his little piece of literature. Moreover, I have suggested that the film version of *The Prestige*, in particular, effects this challenge and reaches these conclusions *itself*. I am only drawing attention to the meaning (and effect) of it.

Thus the final moral of the story I have told is this: if philosophers are going to do some storytelling, they had better do it with enough length and depth. When one does so, in the present case—as Priest and (in particular) the Nolans do—the story told no longer supports Parfitian conclusions.²³

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1. Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986), hereafter abbreviated *RP*. Parfit imagines me saying, "I can see and hear myself ... starting to speak." But evidently I don't "see" myself in the same way I see myself when I look in a mirror (a difference not captured merely by the fact that on the screen I am not left-right reversed). And if I talk to myself here it can't be at all similar to the muttering I do when I'm standing in the kitchen trying to remember what I went in there for. For when I genuinely talk to myself, then (roughly) I'm never surprised by what I hear. But I could be surprised by what my "Martian self" says in Parfit's story. See further below; also note 3 for a doubt about whether Parfit himself buys into the presentation that he apparently offers at this point in his little tale.

2. Here I have problems with the use of "he" or "myself" that Parfit seemingly wants us to accept. Better would be to say that something apparently almost exactly like me

is going to survive on Mars. Insisting that this thing is, in practice, as good as being me would be making a radical (and, as I shall show, dangerously misleading) revision to our language (see note 3). Indeed, it would beg the question.

3. The scare quotes here are essential, because otherwise one risks misinterpreting Parfit. He is not necessarily committed to believing that my “replica” on Mars would in some sense literally be me. To think that he is would be to underestimate the subtlety of Parfit’s presentation. That my “replica” on Mars would be me is apparently implied by the remarks Parfit allows himself in the first few paragraphs of his piece of science fiction. But he then, as I understand him, denies that my replica would be me, or my self, or anything of the kind. What he does claim is that my relation to my replica is as good as ordinary survival. That is a different claim—and is basically what I contest, especially later in this paper.

4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), p. 62.

5. The greatest analyses of such turn taking and its psychosocial importances are to be found in ethnomethodological conversation analysis. See also part I of Rupert Read, *Applying Wittgenstein* (London: Continuum, 2007) for a Wittgensteinian perspective on the centrality of such dialogue in language (and in identity).

6. Although Parfit might not entirely deny this. In creating fission cases like (t)his, he draws on Shoemaker’s Brownson brain-division thought experiment; see Sydney Shoemaker and Richard Swinburne, *Personal Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), pp. 78–79, e.g. Shoemaker is fairly clear that we have two different people who will become much more different as time progresses and they lead different lives. (This difference is surely radically accelerated as they have this initial conversation, as they experience the curious external otherness of the other self.) The point nevertheless is that Parfit does not foreground this divergence; it is absent from his discussion. He presumably then does not see it as central, as I do.

7. Christopher Priest, *The Prestige* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1995); hereafter abbreviated Priest.

8. The script of the movie is widely available online; I reference during this paper the following version: www.dailyscript.com/scripts/Prestige.pdf; hereafter abbreviated *The Prestige* script.

9. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (1953; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1958), section 308; hereafter abbreviated *PI*.

10. Joel Backstrom, “Wittgenstein and the Moral Dimension of Philosophical Problems,” in O. Kuusela and M. McGinn, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

11. As quoted in Gordon Baker, “Wittgenstein: Concepts or Conceptions?” *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, 9 (2001): 20.

12. I owe this potential objection to helpful correspondence with Stephen Mulhall on *The Prestige*.

13. See earlier quote from Wittgenstein on Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, above. Austin thought much the same, and more or less rightly so, in my view. Compare this, from

Isaiah Berlin (from “Austin and the Early Beginnings of Oxford Philosophy,” in *Essays on J. L. Austin*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, p.11), relating a class with Austin:

[Take] the hero of Kafka’s story *Metamorphosis*, a commercial traveller called Gregor Samsa, who wakes one morning to find that he has been transformed into a monstrous cockroach, although he retains clear memories of his life as an ordinary human being. Are we to speak of him as a man with the body of a cockroach, or a cockroach with the memories and consciousness of a man? “Neither,” Austin declared. “In such cases, we should not know what to say. This is when we say ‘words fail us’ and mean this literally. We should need new words. The old ones just would not fit. They aren’t meant to cover this kind of case.”

14. Jerry Goodenough, “Can Value Be Duplicated?” *UEA Papers in Philosophy*, vol. 4 (1995), pp.33–48.

15. For this sense in which our communities are, crucially, individual, see Rupert Read, “Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* as a War Book,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010): 593–612. For a provocative and controversial take on what it partly is for us (contemporary English-speaking peoples) to be the social beings that we are, part of the society that we constitute, is to be individuals, the reader is recommended to consult John Gray’s *Beyond the New Right* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 51–65.

16. Mark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

17. Indeed, as Parfit put it (in personal correspondence with me about this paper (April 14, 2012): “I agree that our intuitions about personal identity are very hard to give up. That’s why I discussed the subject at some length.”

18. The thought here and in the following two paragraphs is taken from Tom Greaves—many thanks to him for these insights.

19. I am not here attacking the metaphysician. Like Wittgenstein, I have great respect for the deep impulse that gives rise to metaphysics, the desire for things to be a certain way (the feeling that they *must* be that way). I am not suggesting that the metaphysician is a mere trickster. I am suggesting a deep connection between the desire of the audience to be taken in by the magician’s tricks and the desire of the reader of metaphysics to be taken in by the metaphysician’s (undeliberate) tricks of language, etc. (a desire connected, of course, in many cases, to the likely desire of the metaphysician to confound himself, to take himself in).

20. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 13–14.

21. See Stephen Mulhall’s work on this point.

22. As in note 19, it is crucial to stress the difference between metaphysicians and conjurers: the latter aim to deceive, the former do not. The former, however, still do deceive, including themselves—and this is why Wittgenstein (in *PI*, p. 308) talks of a “conjuring trick.”

23. Thanks, first, to Derek Parfit for some generous and helpful remarks in correspondence about this paper. Deep thanks to Emma Bell and Vincent Gaine for brilliant

comments that have enriched and helped me restructure the paper, and to Jerry Goodenough, whose comments have greatly improved this paper: several formulations here are directly influenced by or taken from him. Thanks also to Stephen Mulhall, Oskari Kuusela, Phil Hutchinson, Odai Al-Zoubi, and especially Tom Greaves for stimulating conversations about this topic/paper. Many thanks to Peter Kramer for stimulating comments and discussions on an early draft. Thanks to Cathy Rowett and Ruth Makoff for many helpful improvements to the writing in the paper. And many thanks too to Michael Loughlin.

I agree with Goodenough's and Loughlin's published criticisms of Parfit-style and *Star Trek*-style teletransporting and dubious atomistic or quasi-Cartesian assumptions about human being and about continuity that underlie them and other Parfit thought experiments. The present piece, however, is designed to show that, even if we grant the kinds of scenarios that Parfit (Descartes, early Putnam, etc.) uses, we still don't get the conclusions he (they) want! This can be seen by studying properly the tales that Parfit and the others tell.