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PERSONAL IDENTITY AND RATIONALITY*

There are two main views about the nature of personal identity. I shall briefly describe these views, say without argument which I believe to be true, and then discuss the implications of this view for one of the main conceptions of rationality. This conception I shall call "Classical Prudence." I shall argue that, on what I believe to be the true view about personal identity, Classical Prudence is indefensible.

1.

Does the fact of personal identity just consist in certain other facts? Or is it a further fact? This is the question which divides the two main views. One might be called the "reductionist" view. Though they differ on important details, this is the view of Hume and Locke, and, among the moderns, Grice, Ayer, Quinton, Mackie, John Perry, David Lewis, and myself. The non-reductionist view is that of Butler and Reid, Chisholm, Geach, Swinburne, and the great majority of those who think about the question. Some writers cannot be easily assigned to either of these two traditions – such as Kant, or, among the moderns, Williams and Wiggins. These writers I must here ignore. I shall use shorter labels for the two main views. The central claims of the reductionist tradition I shall call *the Complex View*, those of the non-reductionist tradition *the Simple View*.

According to the Complex View, the fact of personal identity over time just consists in the holding of certain other facts. It consists in various kinds of psychological continuity, of memory, character, intention, and the like, which in turn rest upon bodily continuity. According to the Simple View, personal identity does not just consist in these continuities, but is a quite separate "further fact." This is not a claim about the logic of our statements. This is shown by a distinction often drawn within both traditions. Both agree on this description of their disagreement. According to the Complex View, the identity of persons is in its most general features similar to the identity of other complex persisting things, such as, to give Hobbes's example, ships, or, to give Hume's, nations. According to the Simple View, personal identity is quite unlike the identity of ships or nations.

Both traditions would agree when discussing these. They would agree, for instance, that the survival of a nation just consists in various kinds of continuities: demographic, territorial, cultural, political. These continuities are, in part, matters of degree. When they hold to intermediate degrees, there may be no answer to the question, "Does the same nation still exist?" But on both traditions that is not puzzling. And this is because the identity of nations is not, in the relevant sense, a "further fact." Once we know about the various kinds of continuity, there is nothing left to know. On the Complex View, the same should be said about people. This is what the Simple View denies.

The difference between the views is best brought out by considering a range of imaginary "problem cases." The appeal to such cases has some famous critics. Quine, for instance, writes that it misguidedly assumes "that words have some logical force beyond what our past needs have invested them with." But this criticism would be just only if we all believed the Complex View. What the imaginary cases show is that most of us believe, and nearly all are at least strongly inclined to believe, the Simple View. Our words may not, as Quine says, extend to the imaginary cases. But our beliefs do.

We are, for instance, inclined to believe that in all these cases questions about personal identity must have answers. And the answers must, we think, be all-or-nothing. These beliefs could be true only if our identity over time does not just consist in the various continuities. We can imagine cases where the connections between us and some future person hold to every different degree. But we are still inclined to think, "Such a future person must be either, and quite simply, *me*, or *someone else*." And we are inclined to believe that there must *be* an answer. If I am about to lose consciousness, and I ask whether I will ever wake up again, we find it hard to believe that there might be no answer. For our beliefs to be true, our identity cannot resemble that of ships or nations. It cannot consist in the various continuities, but must be some further fact. And this further fact must be all-or-nothing: in every imaginable case it either would or would not obtain.

Most of us believe, or, if asked, would believe, the Simple View. I am in the minority who believe the Complex View. I shall say nothing here to defend this view. Rather I shall ask, if the Complex View is true, what does this imply about rationality?

2.

On one view, the rational thing for each of us to do is what will be best for himself. This view lacks a good name. When attacked by moralists, it is called Egoism, when attacked by the followers of Hume, it is called Prudence. The dispute with the moralists will not concern me here. I could be considering a compromise view which holds it to be rational either to do what will be best for oneself, or to do one's duty. I shall therefore call the view Prudence.

Those who reject the complex View of Personal Identity often suggest that, if it was true, Prudence would be groundless. Butler thought that, on Locke's view, it would be "a fallacy to . . . imagine . . . that our present self will be interested in what will befall us tomorrow." And Swinburne claims that, if there is nothing more to personal identity than the various continuities, we ought to be indifferent whether we live or die. In his words: "In itself surely such continuity has no value."

These claims are too strong. Why should the psychological continuities not have rational significance? Even on the Simple View, they must surely be granted significance. If we retained our identity, but were stripped of all the continuities, we could not do anything at all. Without the connections of memory and intention, we could neither act nor plan nor even think.

The explanation of these claims may be this. They are made by writers who accept the Simple View. On that view, personal identity does not consist in the various continuities, but is a further fact. And this fact is what really matters. Suppose that I am about to die. Some future person, who will not be *me*, will be fully continuous with me. Call him my *Replica*. He will "inherit" all my memories, intentions, and every other feature of me. He will thus take up my life where I left off, finishing my masterpiece, and caring for my children. I may grudgingly admit that such continuities have some interest. At least my years of work will not go with me to the grave. But if my future Replica won't be *me*, as I could easily be persuaded if he was created *before* I died, so that he could hear my last words, then the mere continuities may seem little consolation. Compared with the absence of personal identity, the fact that it will not be *me* who will be alive, finishing off my work and caring for my children, the continuities may seem trivial. And that may lead me to suggest, in Swinburne's words, that "in itself . . . such continuity has no value."

Though perhaps natural, this would be an error. The continuities may seem trivial when compared with the “further fact,” yet be immensely important when compared with every other fact. So if there is no further fact – if it is an illusion – the continuities may have supreme importance. While we accept the Simple View, the further fact seems like the sun, blazing in our mental sky. The continuities are, in comparison, merely like a day-time moon. But when we change to the Complex View, the sun sets. The moon may now be brighter than everything else. It may dominate the sky.

Let us now turn from metaphor to argument. According to the theory I call “Prudence,” the fact of personal identity has great rational significance. The rational thing for *me* to do is whatever will be best for *me*. And this is because of the fact that the person later suffering, or enjoying, will be *me*. It is irrational not to be concerned about what will happen to *me*, while I may in contrast rationally be unconcerned about what happens to anyone else. Can these claims, made by those who believe in Prudence, be attacked by an appeal to the Complex View? If we change from the Simple to the Complex View, we come to believe that the fact of personal identity is less deep, or involves less. It does not involve the further fact, which seemed to have such importance. We might appeal to

- (A) When some rationally significant fact is seen to be less deep, or to involve less, it can be plausibly claimed to be less significant; as the limiting case, it becomes more plausible to claim that it has no significance.

(A) is plausible. But it does not yield an argument against the claims made by those who believe in Prudence. We can indeed claim that, when we come to see that personal identity is less deep, or involves less, we may plausibly think that personal identity has less rational significance. But this only means “less than it had while we believed the Simple View.” It is compatible with our claim that personal identity should still have supreme rational significance. For it may have had this before by a comfortable margin. The claims of Prudence would be undermined if personal identity had no rational significance. According to (A), the claim that it has no such significance is more plausible on the Complex View. But this only means more plausible than it would be on the Simple View. Even on the Complex View, this

claim may still be grossly implausible. These appeals to (A) may perhaps change the opinions of those who already doubted Prudence. But they cannot force defenders of Prudence to yield an inch.

3.

We can do better. If we change from the Simple to the Complex View, we acquire a second belief. The “further fact” of personal identity was assumed to be all-or-nothing. But there is now no further fact. Personal identity over time just consists in the various continuities. And these are in part matters of degree. This provides the premise for a new challenge to Prudence. Central to what I shall call Classical Prudence is

The Equal Concern Claim: A rational person should be equally concerned about all the parts of his future.

As Sidgwick writes, “my feelings a year hence should be just as important to me as my feelings next minute, if only I could make an equally sure forecast of them. Indeed this equal and impartial concern for all parts of one’s conscious life is perhaps the most prominent element in the common notion of the RATIONAL” Someone can of course rationally give less weight to his further future insofar as it is less likely that he will still be alive, or that the predicted consequences of his present acts will then occur. But in deciding what will be best for him, he should count what happens to him in the further future as mattering just as much. Thus, according to Classical Prudence, amongst the grossest kinds of irrationality is to postpone some inevitable and painful event knowing that this postponement will make it, when it comes, much more painful.

By appealing to the Complex View, we can now challenge the Equal Concern Claim. We can start by admitting most of what is claimed by the believers in Prudence. Thus we can admit, for purposes of argument, that mere temporal proximity cannot matter. A person cannot rationally care less about his further future simply because it is further in the future. But this does not show that he cannot rationally care less about his further future. He may have some other ground for doing so.

Why should I now be concerned about my future? Because, we

are now assuming, it is *my* future. We can again admit, for the purposes of argument, that the fact of personal identity does have this rational significance. I would be irrational if I was *not* concerned about my future. But it is a different claim that I should now be *equally* concerned about my *whole* future. We can grant that the fact of personal identity has supreme rational significance, yet challenge the Equal Concern Claim.

We first point out that the fact that some future person will be me just consists in the holding, over time, of the various continuities. Between me now and myself at different future times, there will be the various connections of memory, intention, character, desire, taste, ambition, and the like. Over different periods, these connections differ in both strength and number. They will generally be fewer and weaker over longer periods. These connections are matters of degree. It may help to distinguish two general relations. Psychological continuity we can treat as a transitive relation, and as therefore having no degrees. But there is another general relation, psychological connectedness. And this, over different periods, holds to different degrees.

We have granted, for purposes of argument, that the fact of personal identity has supreme rational significance. But this fact just consists in the holding, over time, of psychological continuity and connectedness (I ignore bodily continuity – which would not be held, simply *by itself*, to have rational significance). We may now appeal to

- (B) When some important relation holds to a lesser degree, it is not irrational to think it less important.

Personal identity over time is, in part, a matter of degree. Over longer periods, the psychological connections will be both fewer, and weaker. According to (B), when what is involved in personal identity holds to a lesser degree, it is not irrational to think it less important. So it may not be irrational for me now to care less about some parts of my future. I may now rationally care less when the relations between me now and myself then will hold to a lesser degree.

This argument defends a kind of “discount rate.” But this is a discount rate not with respect to time itself, but with respect to the weakening of the various connections which are all there is to personal identity. This is an important difference. For one thing, this kind of discount rate will seldom apply at all over the near future. The psychological connections

between me now and myself in five minutes are not significantly closer than the connections between me now and myself in five days, and they may not be closer than the connections between me now and myself in five months, or even five years. But they will be closer than the relations between me now and myself in fifty years.

If our argument justifies this new discount rate, with respect to the degrees of psychological connectedness, it undermines the Equal Concern Claim. It undermines the view that a person ought rationally to be equally concerned about all the parts of his future. That claim is central to Classical Prudence. How might believers in Prudence reply to this argument?

They might, first, offer a counter-argument. They might appeal to

The Truism: All the parts of a person's future are *equally* parts of his future.

We are admitting, for purposes of argument, that each person ought rationally to be concerned about his future *because* it is *his* future. Does an appeal to the Truism provide a good argument for the Equal Concern Claim? It is true that all of a person's future is equally a part of his future. Does this justify the claim that he ought now to be equally concerned about his whole future?

This would be a good argument if the Simple View was true. On the Simple View, the Truism is a profound truth, deep enough to support the argument. But on the Complex View, the truism is too trivial to defend Classical Prudence.

Consider

(C) All of a person's relatives are *equally* his relatives.

In one sense of 'relative', this is true. We can use 'relative of' in a sense which has no degrees. On this use, my children and my distant cousins are as much my relatives. But is this a deep truth?

It must be distinguished from another truth, which requires this same use of relative. On this use 'relative of', is a transitive relation: the relatives of my relatives must be my relatives. This is a very useful use. Since Darwin, it gives new significance to the Great Chain of Being. As we now know, the birds outside my window are, in a literal sense, my relatives. There is no equivocation here. They are

my relatives in the same sense in which my cousins are my relatives. The birds are my n th cousins m times removed. ('Relative of' transcends the bounds of species, else there could be no evolution.)

That all the higher animals are literally my relatives is a profound truth. But is it profoundly true that they are all *equally* my relatives – that the birds are as much my relatives as my own children? This is not a profound truth. It is superficial and (though it never in fact misleads) misleading. That it is true at all is the price we have to pay for the transitivity of 'relative of'. Suppose we say, "By 'relative' we really mean 'not too distant relative' – tenth cousins ten times removed aren't really relatives." This would deprive us of the profound truth that the birds are my relatives. To preserve that truth we must agree that – in a superficial sense – the birds are as much my relatives as my own children.

Since it is superficial, (C) cannot support the kind of argument we are considering. Suppose that, believing strongly in the ties of kinship, I leave all my money to my various relatives. I leave larger portions to my own children. Could my cousins plausible appeal to (C)? Could they claim that, since they are *equally* my relatives, they (and the birds) should have equal shares? Clearly not. In such a context, we must look below (C). We must turn from 'relative' which has no degrees, to 'close relative', which does. It is not irrational to leave less to my cousins than to my children since, as relatives, they are less close.

Similar remarks apply to

(D) All pains are equally pains.

We can use the word 'pain' in a way that makes this true. On this use, a more painful pain is not more of a pain. But this cannot show that it would be irrational to mind it more. Just as kinship is in part a matter of degree, there are degrees of painfulness.

We can now return to the Truism: the claim that all of my future is *equally* my future. This is in no way questioned on the Complex View. And it cannot be treated just like (C) and (D). We can easily turn from 'relative' to 'close relative', or from 'more of a pain' to 'more painful'. An appeal to (C) or (D) can thus be easily dismissed. We need only say, "Some relatives are closer," "Some pains are more painful." But we cannot quite so easily dismiss the argument that

appeals to the Truism. We might start to say, "Some parts of my future are more . . ." More what? There is no sense in which they are more mine.

The defender of Prudence may now smile. How did it help to bring in the comparison with relatives and pains? Perhaps we cannot meet his argument.

We can. To answer the argument, we must make claims which are more complex – which are not just about people, but about people at particular times. This does not mean that we regard 'a person at a time' as a new kind of entity. 'Me now' is not a new discovery of particle psychology. But the Complex View is essentially about people at different times. It is about personal identity over time, or the relations between me now and myself in the future. We are discussing an argument which appeals to the truism that all of my life is equally mine. While we make claims which refer only to people, and ignore time, we may remain impressed by this truth. There is no possible sense in which any of my life can be any the less *mine*. And if personal identity has supreme rational significance, it may seem that this truth cannot be trivial.

We must introduce time. In discussing 'relative of' this was unnecessary. The relation 'relative of' holds between people. So did our corrective 'close relative of'. We could thus at once reply "Some relatives are closer." Identity, notoriously, is a more slippery relation. Like relative of, the relation of personal identity holds between people. It holds between each person and himself. But this relation hardly needs a special discussion – a discussion solely about its application to people. Since everything is identical with itself, and in the same identical way, how can personal identity deserve separate discussion? Time provides the answer. What is interesting in personal identity is not my relation to myself – though that indeed deserves a separate discussion. (That I am I is central to subjectivity, as is the truth that now is now.) What is interesting in personal identity is the relation between me now and myself at other times. This relation is not itself that of personal identity; but it is the relation, or set of relations, whose holding makes it true that there is personal identity over time. And these relations do not hold between people timelessly conceived. They do not hold either between different people, or between one person and himself. They hold between a person at one time and himself at other times.

Once we have introduced time, we can explain the triviality of the Truism. If personal identity has supreme rational significance, what has this significance is not my relation to myself – which of course could not possibly have degrees. What has this significance is the relation between me now and myself at other times. This relation, on the Complex View, just consists in the holding of more particular relations, those involved in psychological continuity, and its bodily ground. And some of these relations hold, over time, to reduced degrees. This is one premise of our argument against the Equal Concern Claim, the other premise being (B), the claim that when some important relation holds to a lesser degree it is not irrational to think it less important. These together imply that it is not irrational for me now to care less about those parts of my future between which and myself now the psychological connections are less close.

The first reply to this argument appealed to the Truism: to the claim that even in my old age it will be just as much *me*. But this just appeals to my identity with me. Because it ignores time, it misses what is most important even in what it does appeal to – personal identity. Once we introduce time, and make our claims about people at times, the appeal to the Truism does not conflict with or challenge the argument we gave against Classical Prudence. Nor does it provide a strong counter-argument. This is because, though true, it is too trivial to support such an argument. The counter-argument is like the claim that I ought to leave as much money to my cousins as to my own children, since my cousins are equally my relatives.

Can the defender of Prudence resist the crucial shift to claims about people at different times? Can he show that our claims should be about people timelessly considered? He might say, “We are not discussing how much you should *now* be concerned about the different parts of your future. We are discussing how much *you* should be concerned about *yourself*. Forget about time. Since you *are* yourself, and identity has no degrees, you should be *equally* concerned about your *whole* self.” Such remarks might have force for my noumenal self, which is outside time. But on the Complex View there is no such self. And my actual self inhabits time. And I cannot be timelessly concerned. I can be concerned only at particular times. So we must be discussing how much I ought at particular times to be concerned about myself at other times. The crucial shift, introducing time, cannot be resisted.

My rejection of the appeal to the Truism is bound to seem more doubtful than my rejection of the appeal to the claim that all my relatives are *equally* my relatives, or that all pains are *equally* pains. No one is misled by these latter truths. But the Truism is only trivial on the Complex View. And we are all strongly inclined to hold The Simple View, on which it is profoundly true. It may therefore help to return to the question which, on both views, separates the views. Is the identity of people like that of ships or nations? Is the Truism like

- (E) All the parts of a nation's history are *equally* parts of that nation's history?

On the Complex View, it is. This comparison may dispel certain doubts. The connections between me now and myself at different times are like the connections between (say) England at different times. One of the natural doubts, often expressed, might be put like this: "The Complex View talks glibly of the relations between me now and myself at other times. But such talk is parasitic on the notion of *me*, the identical subject of all my experiences – the subject whose life this is." This is the notion central to the Simple View, and it may seem vastly more important than all the psychological connections I have been discussing. How can it be trivial that in my old age it will be just as much *me*?

All the parts of England's history are equally parts of England's history. Tudor England was as much England. So was Saxon England. So, if we choose to call it 'England', was Roman England. But, if we call it 'Roman Britain', it was not England at all. We are not led here to think of the nation as quite separate from, and far more important than, all the continuities of people, culture, or political system. We do not think there must be an underlying identical substance, whose persistence cannot be a matter of degree. The comparison between a nation and a person is in some respects not strict. In the case of nations, there are countless actual cases where we can either affirm or deny identity. (The choice is of course not arbitrary, but it is a choice.) There are very few such actual cases when we are discussing personal identity. Given our criteria of personal identity, and the still fictional status of most science fiction – such as, for instance, teletransportation – there are few actual cases where a question of personal identity is, given the other facts, up for

decision. But on the Complex View this is just a (very important) factual difference. The nature of personal identity over time is in its more general features similar to the nature of national identity over time. (This is so despite the fact that, of the two, only persons are organisms.) Both consist in nothing more than the holding over time of various connections, some of which are matters of degree. It is true that in my old age it will be just as much me. But this may be fairly compared with the truth that (say) Austria is still just as much Austria.

If the Complex View is true, the counter-argument for Classical Prudence fails. It appeals to a claim, the Truism, which cannot bear the weight of such an argument. I have also presented an argument against one part of classical Prudence, the Equal Concern Claim. This argument appeals only to a pair of premises. One is provided by the Complex view, and is the claim that one of the important relations involved in personal identity may hold, over time, to reduced degrees. The other is (B), the claim that when some important relation holds to a lesser degree, it is not irrational to think it less important. To resist this argument we must deny either the Complex View or (B). Most of us do deny the Complex View. I believe that we are here mistaken. But I am not discussing this question. I am asking the conditional question: *If* the Complex View is true, can Classical Prudence be defended? If we assume the Complex View, the only possible defence is to deny (B). We must claim

- (F) If some relation is important, it is irrational to think it less important when, and because, it holds to a lesser degree.

(F) is not self-contradictory. But there cannot be many who could honestly claim to believe (F). There are countless relations which we all think less important when, and because, they hold to a lesser degree. These include, for instance, friendship, complicity, relevance, progress, or relative plausibility. (True, if we asserted (F) rather than (B), we could then claim that its lesser plausibility did not make its assertion any the less rational. But this does not make (F)'s assertion any the more rational.)

I should emphasize that (B) is not

- (G) When some important relation holds to a lesser degree, we are rationally required to think it less important.

In the case of many relations, (G) is plausible. But, in the case of many others, it can be plausibly denied. We may claim, for some relations, that there are “thresh-holds” above or below which we may rationally ignore variations in degree. And (G) would not be plausible when applied to personal identity, or to the relations over time in which this consists. If we accept the Complex View, we must admit that certain imaginable variations in degrees of connectedness are such that personal identity spanning such variations would have to be held to have less rational significance. If there was hardly any connectedness between me now and some future person, my relation to that future person must be held to be less significant. But we might claim that, in actual lives, there is always enough connectedness. We might claim that it is therefore never irrational to be equally concerned about all the parts of one’s future. Never irrational, even given our present assumptions about the significance of personal identity, and the fact that the relations in which this consist often hold to reduced degrees.

These last remarks may seem a large concession. But this is not so. A challenge to Classical Prudence need not aim to show that a rational person *must* have a discount rate with respect to the weakening of the various psychological connections. That would be hard to show. But it is unnecessary in attacking Classical Prudence. Near the heart of Prudence is the claim that we *must* be equally concerned about all the parts of our future – that it is irrational to care less about some parts, and, for this reason, to act knowingly against our own best interests. For Classical Prudence, our new discount rate must be held to be irrational. That is why our argument need only appeal to (B), or to the claim that this new discount rate cannot be rationally excluded. To escape this argument the defender of Prudence must appeal to (B)’s denial, (F) – to the claim that, even when important relations holds to a lesser degree, it is irrational on this ground to think them less important. It seems very doubtful that he can honestly make this claim

I conclude that, if the Complex View is true, the Equal Concern Claim is indefensible. Classical Prudence must be abandoned.

4.

Is this important? We might retreat to a new view, *Revised Prudence*. On this view, a person ought rationally to be chiefly concerned with

his own future, but he may now care less about those parts of his future to which he is now less closely connected. Revised Prudence incorporates our discount rate. But it is a radically different view. It breaks the link between Prudence and one's own best interests. That we ought to be equally concerned about our whole future is a claim close to the heart of Classical Prudence. But the heart itself is the claim that it is irrational for anyone to do what he knows will be worse for him. On Revised Prudence, this claim must be abandoned. If it is not irrational to care less about some parts of one's future, it may not be irrational to act, in consequence, against one's own best interests. We may take a simple economic case. Suppose that as a young man I care less about myself in old age. I do so not because that period is further away, but because I am predictably less closely connected – in character, ambitions, and so on – to myself in old age. Since I now care less about my old age, I do not make the financial provisions which Classical Prudence requires. I spend money in my youth from which, if invested, I would have drawn greater benefits in my old age (since I will be poorer then). I am clearly acting against my own best interests. But on Revised Prudence this does not itself justify the charge that I am acting irrationally.

If I am not acting irrationally there is surely an objection to what I am doing. For the sake of smaller benefits, now I am bringing upon myself in old age greater burdens. This may not be irrational. But it is surely open to criticism. We are right to deplore such behaviour. Classical Imprudence is a most regrettable and often (as in the case of smoking) a tragic thing. We need to criticise such behaviour.

If we have abandoned Classical Prudence, we may need to expand the area covered by morality. We may need to make morality annex the territory that has been abandoned. Traditional morality does include some duties towards oneself; but these were typically of a restricted kind, such as a duty to cultivate one's talents, or preserve one's purity. It did not contain the general claim that it is morally wrong knowingly to bring upon oneself a greater burden later merely to avoid a smaller burden sooner. It did not make that claim partly because it did not seem to need to make that claim. Such an act was thought to be irrational, so it did not need to be thought immoral. If we have abandoned Classical Prudence, as I have claimed that we must do if we accept the true view about personal identity, we ought perhaps to extend our moral theory so that it takes over what we have

abandoned. By acting against my interests in my old age I am doing what, impartially considered, has worse effects, or reduces the sum of benefits minus burdens. We should perhaps begin to claim that this is morally wrong, even when it will be *me* who will bear the increased burdens.

This would be a large shift in our conception of morality. And it would have several other implications. I shall end by mentioning just one question. This is a question about the justifications for paternalism. It seems to provide some justification for paternalistic intervention, when this involves coercion or the infringement of autonomy, that we are stopping some person from acting irrationally. I have suggested that we may have to switch to the view that we are stopping this person from acting immorally. Does this either strengthen or weaken the moral case for paternalistic intervention?

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NOTE

*This is the text of a talk. I have not had the time to make the changes and additions that would be expected in a published paper. A longer discussion will appear in my book *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, forthcoming.