

PRELIMINARY ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The central thesis of *I Am You*—that we are all the same person—is apt to strike many readers as obviously false or even absurd. How could you be me and Hitler and Gandhi and Jesus and Buddha and Greta Garbo and everybody else in the past, present and future? In this book I explain how this is possible. Moreover, I show that this is the best explanation of who we are for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that it provides the metaphysical foundations for global ethics.

Variations on this theme have been voiced periodically throughout the ages, from the Upanishads in the Far East, Averroës in the Middle East, down to Josiah Royce in the North East (and West). More recently, a number of prominent 20th century physicists held this view, among them Erwin Schrödinger, to whom it came late, Fred Hoyle, who arrived at it in middle life, and Freeman Dyson, to whom it came very early as it did to me.

In my youth I had two different types of experiences, both of which led to the same inexorable conclusion. Since, in hindsight, I would now classify one of them as “mystical,” I will here speak only of the other—which is so similar to the experience Freeman Dyson describes that I have conveniently decided to let the physicist describe it for “both” of “us”:

Enlightenment came to me suddenly and unexpectedly one afternoon in March when I was walking up to the school notice board to see whether my name was on the list for tomorrow’s football game. I was not on the list. And in a blinding flash of inner light I saw the answer to both my problems, the problem of war and the problem of injustice. The answer was amazingly simple. I called it Cosmic Unity. Cosmic Unity said: There is only one of us. We are all the same person. I am you and I am Winston Churchill and Hitler and Gandhi and everybody. There is no problem of injustice because your sufferings are also mine. There will be no problem of war as soon as you understand that in killing me you are only killing yourself. [Dyson 1979, p. 17]

The subsequent attempt to communicate this insight to others proved as frustrating to Dyson as it did to me. He goes on to write:

For some days I quietly worked out in my own mind the metaphysics of Cosmic Unity. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that it was the living truth. It was logically incontrovertible. It provided for the first time a firm foundation for ethics. It offered mankind the radical change of heart and mind that was our only hope of peace at a time of desperate danger. Only one small problem remained. I must find a way to convert the world to my way of thinking.

The work of conversion began slowly. I am not a good preacher. After I had expounded the

new faith two or three times to my friends at school, I found it difficult to hold their attention. They were not anxious to hear more about it. They had a tendency to run away when they saw me coming. They were good-natured boys, and generally tolerant of eccentricity, but they were repelled by my tone of moral earnestness. When I preached at them I sounded too much like the headmaster. So in the end I made only two converts, one wholehearted and one half-hearted. Even the whole-hearted convert did not share in the work of preaching. He liked to keep his beliefs to himself. I, too, began to suspect that I lacked some of the essential qualities of a religious leader. Relativity was more in my line. After a few months I gave up trying to make converts. When some friend would come up to me and say cheerfully, "How's cosmajoony doing today?" I would just answer, "Fine, thank you," and let it go at that. [Dyson 1979, pp. 17-18]

A major difference between Dyson's experience and my own is that, although Einstein's relativity (and quantum mechanics) also drew me, "Cosmic Unity" was, in the long run, "more in my line." (How there can be a "my line" and "his line" when there is only one of us will in due course be explained.)

The purpose of these introductory remarks is to lay my cards on the table, to explain at least vaguely how I came to believe that I am everyone and why a good deal of my life has been devoted to writing the book you now hold in your hands. I say all this because I believe philosophers, like everyone else, get many of their ideas in flashes of insight—but then, because we are philosophers, we tend to sneak the vagabonds in through the back door at night only to present them later at the front door cloaked in the respectable daylight of reason.

In fairness to reason, however, I should also say that although the germination of the idea was by no means the result of careful and rigorous analysis, it was, indeed, first, the study of physics and then philosophy that showed me how to present the idea in a way that "others" might understand it.

For me, the study of physics proved to be a very curious combination of excitement and frustration. On the one hand, I saw in the strange and mysterious relationship, in quantum mechanics, between the observer and the observed the beginnings of an understanding of the fundamental role consciousness plays in the origin and construction of reality—suggestive of Cosmic Unity but hardly expressible in the impoverished and imprecise language that science has available to deal with consciousness, self, and subjectivity in general. Indeed, even a physicist of no less a caliber than Schrödinger, whose understanding of the physical paradoxes was as profound as anyone's, was moved, by the assiduousness of his lifelong ruminations on the quantum world, to entertain "Cosmic Unity" musings, in

this way:

It is not possible that this unity of knowledge, feeling and choice which you call your own should have sprung into being from nothingness at a given moment not so long ago; rather this knowledge, feeling and choice are essentially eternal and unchangeable and numerically one in all men, nay in all sensitive beings. But not in this sense - that you are a part, a piece, of an eternal, infinite being, an aspect or modification of it, as in Spinoza's pantheism. For we should have the same baffling question: which part, which aspect are you? What, objectively, differentiates it from the others? No, but inconceivable as it seems to ordinary reason, you - and all other conscious beings as such - are all in all. Hence this life of yours which you are living is not merely a piece of the entire existence, but is in a certain sense the whole; only this whole is not so constituted that it can be surveyed in one single glance. [Schrodinger, 1964, pp. 21-22]

Such thoughts, however—regardless of how prompted they may be by the study of the actual problems, and for all their breadth and eloquence—seemed to me to belong more to the realm of poetry or religion than to the knowledge-seeking enterprise of science. It is true, of course that the tendency of the rational scientific mind has been toward grand theories of unification. Even such cursory remarks are sufficient to remind us that the tendency in our thinking to keep reducing the many to the one is not just “mystical” but is a basic motivation of traditional scientific explanation. Witness Faraday’s and Maxwell’s reduction of electricity and magnetism into the single concept of a unified electromagnetic field; Einstein’s equation of energy and mass into one universal “substance,” mass-energy; the subsequent prediction in the 1960s of the mathematical unity between the electromagnetic and weak force and its “demonstration” in the 1980s by the discovery of the “Z” particle; and the present search for a unified field theory under the “grand unification theories,” or GUTs, which in the latest guise as a Superforce acting on an eleven-dimensional space would, in the words of physicist Paul Davies,

represent an amalgamation of matter, spacetime, and force into an integrated and harmonious framework that bestows upon the universe a hitherto unsuspected unity.

All science is essentially a search for unity. The scientist, by relating different phenomena in a common theory or description, unifies part of our bewilderingly complex world. What makes the recent discoveries so exciting is that, in theory, all natural phenomena can now be encompassed within a single descriptive scheme. [Davies 1984, p. 6]

The reasons for the existence in our minds of this “tendency” towards unification may be many. Though this is neither the place to develop an interpretation of such a “Parmenidean tendency” nor argue for it, surely one

of the reasons must be the compelling fact that it has tremendous explanatory power, theoretically, and that, practically, it often works. Faraday's and Maxwell's unification of electricity and magnetism gave us radio and electronics; Einstein's gave us nuclear energy; and so on. That is probably why, in one form or another, this, one of the most fundamental tenets of the knowledge-seeking enterprise since the time of Parmenides, has survived all the conceptual turmoil and paradigm shifts from Parmenides to modern quantum mechanics. The physicist David Bohm, for instance, puts it thus:

one finds, through a study of the implications of the quantum theory, that the analysis of a total system into a set of independently existent but interacting particles breaks down in a radically new way. One discovers, instead, both from consideration of the meaning of the mathematical equations and from the results of the actual experiments, that the various particles have to be taken literally as projections of a higher-dimensional reality . . . [Bohm 1983]

The idea is that what we might regard as two distinct, individual particles can, in Bohm's words, "refer to a single actuality, which is the common ground of both . . ."

Whether or not the "tendency" to explain multiplicity in terms of unity can be shown to be an essential paradigm of scientific thinking is not crucial to my analysis. I wish merely to suggest here, at the onset, that the broad strokes with which we paint our extraordinary "scientific" pictures will do just as well for painting extraordinary, "metaphysical" ones. And if at first I use broad strokes to make a claim about broad strokes it is only because I prefer to save the fine-tipped brushes for sketching in the details of the grand picture that puts you at the center of everything.

That is, I am not suggesting that we should draw conclusions about the truth of "Cosmic Unity" from any of these preliminary remarks. Rather, I am here merely making the observation that while Cosmic Unity goes very much against our ordinary, common-sense perception of ourselves and the world, the urge behind the formulation of it does not, contrary to what one may at first think, require a greater or more radical departure from our ordinary rational methodology than we have already been willing to make in science.

In other words, going from a many-persons view to a one-person view might put a great burden on commonsense conceptual schemes—but no greater a burden than did (at the time) the leap from Newtonian Mechanics to Einsteinian relativity or, say, the switch from a geocentric to a heliocentric view of the solar system. That is, going from the idea that you

are one person living in a world containing billions of persons to the idea that you are everyone may (or may not) require a leap of the imagination, but if it does the leap required is no greater than the shift from an absolute to a relativity physics or the change from a stationary earth to a moving one. Such great leaps are neither absurd nor unimaginable. If we can make them in contemporary science, we can try to make them in contemporary philosophy.

It was in fact my initial experience with theoretical quantum physics and then philosophy that made Cosmic Unity seem more plausible than it would have seemed had I been immersed in a Newtonian worldview or the commonsense worldview of the proverbial man on the street. This double philosophical shift from what Wilfred Sellars calls the “manifest” (commonsense, pre-theoretical) to the “scientific” (post-theoretical) image in physics and philosophy, I was shocked to find, had striking elements in common. Indeed, my personal tugs of war between identity and consciousness on the one hand and physics and cosmology, on the other, had quite literally come to a head, namely, my own:

One day my physics advisor took me aside and said, “Look, Dan, you keep asking these big questions. Why don’t you first try and understand all the little answers?” Try as I would however, the big questions just kept popping into my head in the most inopportune moments: what is an observer? What is an observation? Is physics the study of the world or of our understanding of the world? Finally, my advisor got so frustrated he suggested that perhaps my temperament might make me better suited to philosophy. I asked what philosophy was. I had never even *heard* of it. He said something like, “That’s where all they do is ask big questions to which there are no answers.” A few years later, I was in my second year of graduate school, working with a great philosopher of science, Dudley Shapere, who was as well versed in relativity theory and quantum mechanics as any physicists I had ever known. I was working on various foundational problems in the philosophy of space and time when it occurred to me that one could make a model of a singularity that was *nothing like* the singularity envisioned by Penrose and Hawking. Penrose’s nothing was basically an orderly singularity with enough chaos in it to generate galaxies, stars, and, eventually, people. This to me seemed not at all *nothinglike*; it was structured in certain formal ways. In my model of the universe I was trying to work out how a completely unPenrose-like and unHawking-like *completely unstructured nothingness* would preclude there ever being anything. I would then use my *ultrasingularity* theorem *that nothing whatsoever exists* as a Kantian antinomy to the Hawking-Penrose singularity and thereby show that physicists could not use a singularity as an ultimate explanation for why there is something rather than nothing. I showed my model of the universe to Shapere who suggested I see his friend in the physics department, a well-known physicist named Charles Misner who had—contrary to Penrose and Hawking—been developing what he called a *chaotic* singularity model [see, e.g. Misner 1968], in

which he tried to show how a universe could nevertheless come out of even a completely unstructured nothing. Shapere told him he had a graduate student who perhaps had the making of a doctoral dissertation that Misner might be interested in. When I showed Misner my model and what I was trying to do with it, he pointed out various mistakes and gaps but suggested that I might indeed wish to develop this further as a doctoral dissertation. He said, “The key thing you’ve got to decide here is whether you want to patch this thing up far enough mathematically so that it answers your questions, or if you’re just going to leave it this way to make philosophical problems.” In other words: did I want to be a physicist or a philosopher?

Instead of being excited, I left Misner’s office in a quandary. Had it really come to this? Did scientists simply patch things up to get their ultimate answers? Did philosophers just squint the right way to keep making problems? [Kolak 2001b, p. 411]

When I then pointed out to my professors that I had also come essentially to the same view of personal identity as Erwin Schrödinger and Freeman Dyson, and was now wondering how consciousness as I saw it numerically identical everywhere could be brought into the Big Picture, everyone made a convincing case that I should give up such nonsense except Ray Martin (co-author of our *Wisdom Without Answers!*), who inspired me to develop my view and become a philosopher. Under Ray’s guidance I wrote my doctoral dissertation: *I Am You: A Philosophical Explanation of the Possibility That We Are All the Same Person*.

That was nearly two decades ago. I have since then continued to develop my view. This book is the result. I draw on parts of my dissertation throughout. Sections of Chapter 2 and 3 draw on my “The Metaphysics and Metapsychology of Personal Identity: Why Thought Experiments Matter In Deciding Who We Are,” and Chapter 7 draws on “Personal Identity and Causality: Becoming Unglued,” both published in *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Chapter 6 draws on “Finding Our Selves: Individuation, Identification, and Multiple Personality Disorder,” published in *Philosophical Psychology*. I have also drawn from some of the work Ray and I did on *Self and Identity: Contemporary Philosophical Issues*, published by Macmillan. I have also drawn on my dialogue with Dan Dennett, “Consciousness, Self and Reality,” some of which I have excerpted here (in *Questioning Matters*, McGraw-Hill), as well as from my *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus* and *From the Presocratics to the Present*, both now published by McGraw-Hill.

In presenting my arguments I rely on and present detailed analyses of much recent work on personal identity, especially that of Derek Parfit, Sydney Shoemaker, and Robert Nozick, whom I thank for inspiring me with an eminently suitable model of philosophical explanation without

which this would have been a very different, and far lesser, work; I am very sorry that he did not live to see this publication. Also, the work of David Wiggins, and Thomas Nagel, as well as the less recent but still, from the standpoint of the development of my view, centrally important work of Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Averröes, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, Royce, James, Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer, Kant, Husserl and Brouwer. My development of the implied moral theory owes much to Rawls, Sidgwick, again Kant and again Parfit. I hope I have presented their views fairly. Since I am using their work to support a view that most of them do not hold I suspect I may not always have been entirely successful. I am in that regard especially grateful to Derek Parfit, who has over the years provided me with over fifty pages of detailed comments and much critical advice on several different drafts. That Parfit has been so helpful in the development of a view directly antithetical to his own is a testament to his extraordinary character. Brian Garrett gave me superb comments. Garrett Thomson (yet a third Oxfordian) provided me with many helpful suggestions on various drafts. Freeman Dyson importantly showed me by example that a rational and scientifically minded person could believe that we are all the same person and provided much needed personal encouragement, especially at the beginning. I will never forget that night when, as an overanxious graduate student at the University of Maryland, driving him to Union Station in Washington, D.C., ignorant of Dyson's views on the subject, I hesitantly explained what I believed. Dyson turned, his face suddenly a black hole in the light of the train, except for his eyes and his smile, twinkling: "Why, I've believed that for a very long time." His letters, like the unexpected fax that came in one night from the High Energy Physics Group at Princeton, from John Archibald Wheeler, have lost none of their initial impact. Sam Gorovitz, Jerry Levinson, and Alan Pasch gave needed support and excellent criticism; Sam, especially, has been a helpful mentor over the years. Most recently, over the past several years I have had the great fortune of spending a good deal of time with Jaakko Hintikka from whom I have learned more about philosophy at the cutting edge than I have from any other cutting edge philosopher, ever.

This book has profited from many other fruitful discussions and communications, far too numerous to mention. Some that particularly stand out in my mind, in no particular order, as having had a direct bearing are discussions with John Symons, Daniel Dennett, John Prager, Peter Unger, Steve Stich, Jay Lombard, Alvin Plantinga, Paul Davies, Dudley Shapere, Fred Suppe, Eddy Zemach, Bill Boos, David Goloff, Bill Hirstein, Victor

Velarde, John O'Connor, Marshall Missner, Charles Misner, Nelson Pike, Melinda Cambell, Raz Abelson, Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Burton Dreben, John Archibald Wheeler, Jorge Luis Borges, Jack Salamanca and Willard Quine.

In this work I do not rely on ancient, medieval, and modern arguments. Rather, I arrive at the view through an analysis of the contemporary philosophical debates on the problem of personal identity. In the process of explaining how it is possible that we are all the same person, I offer a new explanation both of consciousness and of self-consciousness, a new theory of Self, of certain psychopathologies, provide some links to initial mathematical models (e.g. Stone-Čech compactification, Hausdorff spaces, Taub-NUT space, the Gödel Universe, singularities) and nonlocality, broaden the philosophical applications of Hintikka's IF Logic, integrate the phenomenology of space and time from intuitionistic points of view, bridge analytic and phenomenological methods, provide an analysis of conceptual reference frames with an eye as to how to go about revising them from within, and in the widest sense construct a protracted counterexample to the received scope and limits of formal philosophy. Moreover, I show that we are all the same person turns out to be the best competing explanation of who we are for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that it provides the metaphysical foundations for global ethics.

The book is intended not only for philosophers in the traditional sense but also those philosophers in physics, mathematics, psychiatry and psychology, linguistics, computer science, economics, communication theory, and other related disciplines, for whom personal identity and consciousness matter, albeit typically in a suppressed way because putting these issues up front may be disruptive to their own disciplines, while a fuller explanation may bring about a sea change. Those not afraid of sea change should therefore find the book interesting; those seeking one should find it eminently helpful. The book is also accessible to graduate students and advanced undergraduates.

The philosophical problem of personal identity is to explain what it is that makes me *me* and you *you*. What is it that makes me one unified and continuously existing individual person throughout various changes over time, and you another? This, however, is an amazingly difficult question to answer. For instance, David Wiggins writes:

Most of us are committed to thinking that if any of our concepts are sound then person is. We think that, being people, we understand what a person is. We also have a very exact understanding of the relation of sameness. Together these understandings should suffice to give a sound principle

for same person—a criterion of individuation for persons. How then can personal identity confront us with such a variegated multitude of apparently insoluble cases? [Wiggins 1976, p. 157]

Thus, as it turns out, it is not as if the far-fetched idea that we are all the same person is up against some clear-cut and well understood “ordinary” notion of person. The “ordinary” notion is, as we shall see, itself deeply problematic.

Second, some of the best recent philosophers, such as Derek Parfit and Robert Nozick, have tried to solve the “variegated multitude of apparently insoluble cases” by moving away from “ordinary” notions of personhood and claiming, for instance, that the unity of individual personhood is weaker than we ordinarily suppose—a view we shall discuss at some length. Parfit, for instance, struggling with the various personal identity puzzles, tries to solve them, as Thomas Nagel puts it,

By breaking down the metaphysical boundaries between himself and other persons, and loosening the metaphysical bonds that connect him now with his future self . . . [View From Nowhere, p. 224]

Parfit writes:

If some unity is less deep, so is the corresponding disunity. The fact that we live different lives is the fact that we are not the same person. If the fact of personal identity is less deep, so is the fact of non-identity. There are not two different facts here, one of which is less deep . . . while the other remains as deep. There is merely one fact, and this fact’s denial. *The separateness of persons is the denial that we are all the same person. If the fact of personal identity is less deep, so is this fact’s denial.* [italics mine, Reasons and Persons, p. 339]

Thus in the current literature on personal identity there is already a movement away from the “ordinary” view of persons, a move that, on Parfit’s reading at least, weakens the boundaries between us. It doesn’t remove them, it just—at least in Parfit’s own eyes—weakens them, and this has a profound effect on Parfit’s life:

My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others. [p. 281]

So there is this gap, the “difference between my life and the lives of others.” The present work is as an attempt to narrow, as well as we can and

as far as we can, the remaining gap.

To distinguish it from the traditional, commonsense view of personal identity according to which we are each a separately existing person numerically identical to ourselves over time—i.e., that personal identity is closed under our known individuating and identifying borders, what I call *The Closed Individual View of Personal Identity*, or simply *Closed Individualism* for short—I call my view *The Open Individual View of Personal Identity*, or simply *Open Individualism* for short. I argue for Open Individualism by showing the grave conceptual difficulties in supposing that traditional Closed Individualism is true, difficulties which point collectively in one of two new directions: either there exist no continuously existing, self-identical persons over time in the sense ordinarily understood—the sort of view developed by philosophers as diverse as Buddha, Hume and most recently Derek Parfit, what I call *The Empty Individual View of Personal Identity*, or simply *Empty Individualism* for short—or else you are identical to everyone. As so often in life, either we get too much or not enough: everyone or no one. Contrary to popular belief, Closed Individualism is not even a coherent view; the two coherent views are Empty Individualism and Open Individualism. Of the two, Open Individualism is the better view. Open Individualism is the best explanation of who we are.

Here, now, I offer a full-contact philosophy for what may well be nothing less than the final showdown in our age-old Socratic battle against authority. Thinking that what matters is not what separates us but what we all have in common undermines all authority, even our own. It unmasks personal separatism as an illusion by which we dominate each other because we cannot dominate ourselves. The logic of identity forbids it.

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DANIEL KOLAK
Pomona, New York