

HAROLD W. NOONAN

## THE POSSIBILITY OF REINCARNATION

### I

Man has always hoped to survive his bodily death, and it is a central tenet of many religions that such survival is a reality. It has been supposed by many that one form such survival might take is reincarnation in another body. Subscribers to this view include Pythagoras, Plato sometimes, and a large number of Eastern thinkers. Other thinkers have, of course, disputed that reincarnation is a fact, and some have even denied that it is a possibility. But seldom has it been claimed by its opponents that reincarnation is a *logical impossibility*.

This, however, is the central contention of a recent article by J. J. MacIntosh.<sup>1</sup> Reincarnation, MacIntosh maintains, is a logical impossibility because '[g]iven only two very simple necessary truths about identity, plus elementary first-order modal logic, we can show that reincarnation is impossible'. Anyone who denies this 'must reject one of the following: propositional logic, elementary modal logic, the reflexivity of identity or modal substitution in Leibniz's Law'.

The particular logical truth with which, MacIntosh claims, the possibility of reincarnation is in conflict is the principle of the *necessity of identity*: that if  $a = b$  then necessarily,  $a = b$ . Proofs of this principle are familiar to philosophers and logicians and MacIntosh gives one in his article. I shall not be disputing the necessity of identity in what follows.

However, I *shall* be disputing MacIntosh's claim that the necessity of identity rules out the possibility of reincarnation. As we shall see, there are broadly two lines of thought to follow for one who wishes to maintain, consistently with the necessity of identity, the possibility of reincarnation: one line is to develop a theory of personal identity in terms of psychological continuity and/or connectedness which takes a 'best candidate' form and to reject a principle I shall refer to as 'the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle'. The other line is to accept the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle, but still to maintain that psychological continuity provides a sufficient ground for identity. A proponent of this second line must endorse what I shall refer to as 'the multiple occupancy view' of certain situations described in the philosophical literature on personal identity.

Both of these lines of thought have been well-developed in the philosophi-

<sup>1</sup> J. J. MacIntosh, 'Reincarnation and Relativized Identity', *Religious Studies*, xxv (1989), 153–65.

cal literature on personal identity and each has eminent defenders. The first line of thought is defended by, for example, Shoemaker, Parfit and Nozick, whilst the second is defended by David Lewis and John Perry.<sup>2</sup> Each line has certain implausibilities attaching to it, but neither line requires its proponents to reject the necessity of identity. MacIntosh's argument is thus mistaken.

Let us now turn to the details of his argument to see precisely why this is so.

## II

MacIntosh's argument is an extension of Bernard Williams's famous Reduplication Argument.<sup>3</sup> The avowed aim of Williams's argument is to defend the thesis that bodily identity is a necessary condition of personal identity and hence to show that accounts of personal identity in terms of psychological continuity and/or connectedness, which would allow personal identity in the absence of bodily identity, are mistaken.

Williams sets the stage for his Reduplication Argument by imagining the case of a man, whom he calls 'Charles', who turns up in the twentieth century claiming to be Guy Fawkes:

All the events he claims to have witnessed and all the actions he claims to have done point unanimously to the life of some one person in the past ... Guy Fawkes. Not only do all Charles' memory claims fit the pattern of Fawkes' life as known by historians, but others that cannot be checked are plausible, provide explanations of unknown facts and so on.

It is tempting, in this case, to identify Charles, as he now is, with Guy Fawkes, in other words, to regard the case as one of reincarnation. For what Williams is in effect supposing is that the evidence available in the case is everything for which believers in reincarnation could possibly wish. But, Williams argues, one is not obliged to do so, and in fact so to describe the case would be vacuous. For if this were to happen to Charles it could also happen simultaneously to his brother Robert. There would then be two equally good candidates for identity with Guy Fawkes, and since two people cannot be one person *neither* could be Guy Fawkes. Hence, Williams concludes, neither should one identify Charles with Guy Fawkes in the original case where there is no reduplication, for the absence of Robert from the case has nothing to do with the *intrinsic* relations between Charles and Guy Fawkes – the relations that obtain between them independently of what is true of other

<sup>2</sup> See S. Shoemaker, 'Persons and their Pasts', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, VII (1970), 269–85. D. Parfit, 'Personal Identity', *Philosophical Review*, LXXX 3–27 and *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), D. Lewis, 'Survival and Identity' in A. Rorty (ed.), *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), John Perry, 'Can the Self Divide?', *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXIII (1972), 463–88.

<sup>3</sup> See B. Williams, 'Personal Identity and Individuation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* LVII (1956–7), 229–52.

people – but it is absurd to suppose that whether a later person  $x$  is identical with an earlier person  $y$  can depend upon facts about people *other than*  $x$  and  $y$ .

This objection does not apply only to putative cases of reincarnation. It applies also to cases which even an opponent of reincarnation might wish to regard as providing examples of personal identity. Such cases, typically involving brain-transplants, or brain-hemisphere transplants or brain-state transfers are very familiar from the recent philosophical literature on personal identity.<sup>4</sup>

How, then, might someone who wishes to maintain that in reincarnation, or in one or more of the other processes just listed, personal identity is preserved in the absence of bodily identity, reply to Williams's Reduplication Argument?

### III

There are two main lines of reply to the argument. One reply, adopted by many defenders of the view that personal identity should be accounted for in terms of psychological continuity, is simply to take the bull by the horns and to reject the principle underlying Williams's argument. This is the principle that whether a later individual  $x$  is identical with an earlier individual  $y$  can depend only on facts about  $x$  and  $y$  and the relationships between them: no facts about any other individuals can be relevant to whether  $x$  is  $y$ . I call this principle *the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle*. Applied to the special case of personal identity, it asserts that whether a certain later person  $P_2$  is identical with a certain earlier person  $P_1$  can depend only on facts about  $P_2$  and  $P_1$  and the intrinsic relationships between them; no facts about individuals other than  $P_2$  and  $P_1$  can be relevant to whether  $P_2$  is the same person as  $P_1$ .<sup>5</sup> If this principle is rejected someone who wishes to allow for the possibility of personal identity in the absence of bodily identity can sidestep the Reduplication Argument very easily by maintaining that psychological continuity is a sufficient condition of personal identity only in the absence of a 'rival candidate'. That is:  $P_2$  at  $t_2$  is the same person as  $P_1$  at  $t_1$  just in case  $P_2$  at  $t_2$  is psychologically continuous with  $P_1$  at  $t_1$  and there is no 'rival candidate'  $P_2^*$  also psychologically continuous with  $P_1$ .

But most philosophers who reply to Williams's argument by rejecting the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle also wish to allow that  $P_2$  can be the same person as  $P_1$  *even if* rival candidates exist, so long as  $P_2$ 's claim to identity with  $P_1$  is *stronger than* those of its rivals. In other words they prefer a 'best candidate'

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, S. Shoemaker, 'Persons and their Pasts' for brain-transplants, D. Wiggins, *Identity and Spatio-temporal Continuity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967) for brain-hemisphere transplants and B. Williams, 'The Self and the Future', *Philosophical Review*, LXXIX (1970), 161–80 for brain-state transfers. See also H. W. Noonan, *Personal Identity* (Routledge, 1989) for a general survey.

<sup>5</sup> This is only a rough statement of the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle: for a discussion of its inadequacies and a reformulation designed to avoid them see H. W. Noonan, *Personal Identity*, Ch. 7.

theory of personal identity to a 'no rival candidate' theory. Such a theory is put forward by Sydney Shoemaker and by Robert Nozick.<sup>6</sup> Nozick's version of the theory is the most sophisticated in the philosophical literature. He refers to it as 'the closest continuer' theory of personal identity. It asserts that  $P_2$  at  $t_2$  is the same person as  $P_1$  at  $t_1$  just in case  $P_2$  at  $t_2$  is (sufficiently) psychologically continuous with  $P_1$  at  $t_1$  and there is no other continuer of  $P_1$  existing at  $t_2$  who is psychologically continuous with  $P_1$  to an equal or greater degree. (Actually this statement would need to be further qualified to deal with cases of 'fusion' as well as 'fission', i.e. merging as well as branching of links of psychological continuity, and also to deal with the existence of continuers existing at times between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , but for present purposes we can pass over these details.) We can call this *the Revised Psychological Continuity Criterion* of personal identity.

A second way a believer in the possibility of reincarnation, or more generally, in the possibility of personal identity in the absence of bodily identity, can defend himself against Williams's Reduplication Argument is to question the logic of that argument. According to Williams, in a reduplication situation the rival candidates for identity with the original person are new existents, identical neither with him nor with one another. But it is possible, or so it has been argued by several recent writers (among them John Perry and David Lewis), to retain the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle whilst rejecting this description of the reduplication situation. It must, of course, be accepted that the 'post-fission' rivals are distinct people, but it is possible, according to these philosophers, to reject the view that they are new existents; rather they have existed all along, but have only become spatially distinct with the fission. There are various versions of this view. Their common element I will refer to, following Robinson,<sup>7</sup> as the *Multiple Occupancy Thesis*. The essence of this thesis is that what makes it the case that two people existing at a certain time *are* two, may be facts about what is the case at *other* times, i.e. their distinctness at the time in question may obtain only in virtue of facts *extrinsic* to that time, so that at the time, in David Lewis's words,<sup>8</sup> they comprise 'two minds with but a single thought', not merely to quote Robinson, 'as alike as two peas in a pod', but 'as alike as *one* pea in a pod'.

## IV

The heart of MacIntosh's argument is that a defender of the possibility of reincarnation who responds to Williams's argument by rejecting the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle and endorsing a 'best candidate' account of personal identity

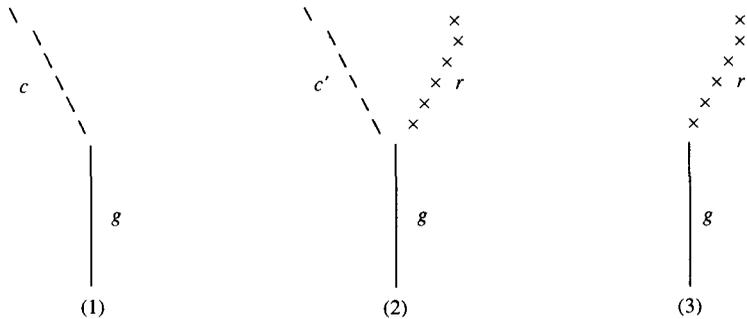
<sup>6</sup> S. Shoemaker, 'Persons and their Pasts' and R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*.

<sup>7</sup> D. Robinson, 'Can Ameobae Divide without Multiplying?', *Australian Journal of Philosophy*, LXIII (1985), 299–319.

<sup>8</sup> D. Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 1988), postscript to 'Survival and Identity'.

along the lines of, for example, the Revised Psychological Continuity Criterion, is committed to denying the necessity of identity. For he must hold that Charles *is* Guy Fawkes in the situation in which there is no reduplication, but *is not* Guy Fawkes in the situation in which there is reduplication. Consequently he must hold that 'Charles is identical with Guy Fawkes', when true, is a contingent truth and not a necessary one.

To see the error in this reasoning it will be convenient to picture the three situations we are concerned with as follows:



Here the second situation is the reduplication situation described by Williams in which both Charles and his brother Robert have recollections of Guy Fawkes' life. The first situation is that in which Charles has such recollections, but Robert does not, and the third situation, added for the sake of completeness, is that in which Robert has such recollections but Charles does not.

In each drawing the continuous line represents the history of the historical Guy Fawkes, from birth to death at the stake. The line of dashes in drawings 1 and 2 represent the twentieth-century history of the person occupying Charles' body who has recollections of Guy Fawkes' life, and the line of crosses in drawings 2 and 3 represents the twentieth-century history of the person occupying Robert's body who has recollections of Guy Fawkes' life.

If we designate the person originally referred to in all three situations as 'Guy Fawkes' by 'g', the occupant of Charles' body in situation 1 by 'c', the occupant of Charles' body in situation 2 by 'c'', the occupant of Robert's body in situation 2 by 'r' and the occupant of Robert's body in situation 3 by 'r'', then if we reject the Only *x* and *y* principle we can, in conformity with the view that situation 1 involves reincarnation whilst situation 2 does not, assert that in situation 1,  $g = c$ , in situation 2, neither  $g = c'$  nor  $g = r$ , and in situation 3,  $g = r'$ . These assertions are compatible with the necessity of identity if it is not the case that  $c = c'$  (or  $r = r'$ ). But is a 'best candidate' theorist committed to holding that  $c = c'$ ? MacIntosh assumes that he is, and this is the basis of his rejection of the 'best candidate' approach to personal identity, and with it, the possibility of reincarnation.

But, in fact, the 'best candidate' theorist need not accept that  $c = c'$ . In

fact, given the necessity and transitivity of identity he *cannot* accept that  $c = c'$ . On pain of inconsistency he must regard  $c$  and  $c'$  as different persons. Thus he must regard the description 'the person occupying Charles' body' as a *non-rigid* designator, which designates one person, i.e.  $c(=g)$  in situation 1 and another person, i.e.  $c'$  (not:  $=g$ ) in situation 2.

Of course, if the 'best candidate' theorist accepts this, he can no longer take the candidates he is concerned with in situation 2 to be the two later *people*, and take it that what they are candidates for is literally *identity* with the (one and only) original Guy Fawkes (for if  $c$  is distinct from  $c'$ ,  $c'$  is in *no* situation identical with  $g$ , and so it cannot be that he is not identical with  $g$  in situation 2 *only because the equally good candidate*  $r$  is also present there). But he need not take this view, and 'best candidate' theorists who have their wits about them do not.

For example, Robert Nozick, who regards enduring entities as 'four-dimensional worms', composed of temporal parts or stages, takes the competing candidates in such a reduplication situation to be, not persons, but *person-stages*. And what they are candidates for, on his view, is not *identity* with the original Guy Fawkes, but rather *being at the later time the stage (temporal part) of Guy Fawkes occurring then*. The person-stage present in situation 1 at the location of person  $c$ , possesses this property there, but only contingently if in situation 2 not:  $g = c'$ , for then, while still existing in situation 2, it does not possess it there. But it does not follow that there is any *person* which exists both in situation 1 and in situation 2 and is identical with Guy Fawkes in situation 1, but distinct from him in situation 2. For despite appearances the person  $c'$ , not being identical with the person  $c$ , is not present in situation 1 at all.<sup>9</sup>

Nor does the 'best candidate' theorist need to be a four-dimensional metaphysician in order to deny the identification of  $c$  with  $c'$ . Consistently with the rejection of a temporal worm metaphysics he can, for example, take Nathan Salmon's line, deny that  $c = c'$  and take the rival candidates involved in the case to be, neither persons nor person-stages, but rather *the hunks of matter* constituting  $c'$  and  $r$ . Then he can say that what these are rival candidates for is, again, not identity with the original Guy Fawkes, but rather: *being at the later time the hunk of matter constituting Guy Fawkes then*. The hunk of matter constituting  $c$  in situation 1 possesses this property there, but only contingently if in situation 2 not:  $g = c'$ , since then, though it certainly exists in situation 2 (where it constitutes  $c'$ ), it does not possess it there. But it does not follow that there is any *person* in situation 1 who is identical with Guy Fawkes there, but distinct from him in situation 2, for this contingency of constitution is distinct from the contingency of identity, and does not entail it, and despite appearances person  $c'$  is not present in situation 1 at all.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, pp. 656ff.

<sup>10</sup> See N. Salmon, *Reference and Essence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), Appendix 1.

MacIntosh is thus mistaken in assuming that it is essential to the 'best candidate' approach to the case of Guy Fawkes and Charles/Robert that  $c$  be identified with  $c'$  and the necessity of identity be abandoned; this would indeed be the case if the 'best candidate' theorist was obliged to regard the later people  $c'$  and  $r$  as the competing candidates for identity with the original Guy Fawkes. But he is not so obliged. The 'best candidate' theorist has, indeed, to choose between rejecting the identification of  $c$  with  $c'$  and abandoning the necessity of identity, but both courses are open to him, and as we have seen, two actual 'best candidate' theorists have opted for the former.

This is not to say, of course, that there are *no* grounds for objection to the 'best candidate' approach to personal identity and the account of the possibility of reincarnation it involves; on the contrary, the 'best candidate' approach has a number of highly counter-intuitive consequences.

First, as we have seen, a 'best-candidate' theorist is committed to holding that not:  $c = c'$  and hence that despite appearances  $c'$  is not present in situation 1 at all. He must then acknowledge that the following is a possibility: we could walk up to Charles in the reduplication situation and, speaking of Robert, say to him, perfectly correctly, 'You should consider yourself fortunate that that other fellow seems to be as good as you are at reminiscing about attempts to blow up the Palace of Westminster, if he hadn't been you *would never have existed*.' But it seems obvious that in making such an acknowledgement the 'best candidate' theorist would be committing himself to a highly counter-intuitive position.

The second counter-intuitive consequence of the 'best candidate' approach can be brought out by noting that in situation 2  $c'$ , not being identical with  $g$ , i.e.  $c$ , is a wholly twentieth-century person. But *the very same events* which constitute the history of  $c'$  in situation 2 also occur in situation 1, where they constitute, according to the 'best candidate' theorist, part of the history of  $c$ , i.e.  $g$ . Thus the events which constitute the origin of  $c'$  in situation 2 do not constitute the origin of  $c'$ , or any person, in situation 1, since  $c = g$ , who came into existence much earlier. This illustrates the second counter-intuitive consequence of the 'best candidate' approach to which I wish to draw attention: *events which constitute the origin of some person in one situation may not constitute the origin of that, or any, person, in a second situation, even though all the events constituting the history of that person in the first situation remain present in the second.*

Again, if we go along with the 'best candidate' approach and accept that  $g = c$ , but not:  $g = c'$ , and hence not:  $c = c'$ , we are committed to saying that two events in the history of person  $c$ , i.e. person  $g$ , in situation 1, one occurring in the seventeenth century and one in the twentieth, will fail to be common parts of the history of that person, or of any single person, in situation 2, even though both they, and all the events which were parts of the history of person  $c$  in situation 1, remain present in situation 2. This illustrates a third highly

counter-intuitive consequence of the 'best candidate' approach: *two events may be parts of the history of a single person in some situation, but may fail to be parts of the history of that person, or any single person, in a second situation in which both they, and all the events which were parts of the history of the person in the first situation, remain present.*

The 'best candidate' theory is thus hardly a common-sensical view, but the crucial point to appreciate, in order to assess MacIntosh's argument against the possibility of reincarnation, is that it is not *logically* at fault, for its counter-intuitive consequences, whether or not ultimately acceptable, are not denials of any logical principles, and, in particular, are not in conflict with the modal principle of the necessity of identity.

v

But there is another respect in which MacIntosh's argument against the possibility of reincarnation is inadequate. For, as we have seen, a 'best candidate' approach is not the only approach to personal identity which can allow for the possibility of reincarnation. In fact the shape of the alternative account can be arrived at quite straightforwardly by deducing what must be true of situations 1, 2 and 3 above if we retain the assumption that situations 1 and 3 involve Guy Fawkes' reincarnation, and *also* retain the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle.

If one accepts the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle one has to deny that  $c'$  in situation 2 and  $c$  in situation 1 have different origins, or indeed that  $c'$  in situation 2 has a history which is anything other than that of  $c$  in situation 1. That is to say, either  $c$  in situation 1 did not come into existence until the twentieth century, or  $c'$  in situation 2 was in existence in the seventeenth century. The first alternative is incompatible with the assumption that situation 1 involves the reincarnation of Guy Fawkes. So we are left with the second alternative. Similarly with regard to  $r$  and  $r'$ , we have to say either that  $r'$  in situation 3 did not come into existence until the twentieth century, or that  $r$  in situation 2 was in existence in the seventeenth century. Again the first alternative is incompatible with the assumption that situation 3 involves the reincarnation of Guy Fawkes. So we must accept the second alternative. If we are to describe situations 1 and 3 as involving Guy Fawkes' reincarnation, then, the acceptance of the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle forces us to say that in situation 2 the persons  $c'$  and  $r$ , who later on are manifestly distinct, share the same origin and an initial part of their history. This is an instance of the Multiple Occupancy Thesis introduced previously.

But if  $c$  and  $c'$  have exactly the same history and  $r$  and  $r'$  have exactly the same history, nothing stands in the way of concluding that  $c = c'$  and  $r = r'$ , and this is obviously what a defender of the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle must conclude. But since  $c'$  (or  $c$ ) is distinct from  $r$  (or  $r'$ ), it follows that it cannot be true both that  $g = c$  in situation 1 and  $g = r'$  in situation 3. Whence we

have to conclude that drawings 1 to 3 have been mislabelled: 'g' was originally introduced to name *the* person originally referred to (in the seventeenth century) in all three situations as 'Guy Fawkes', but in situation 1 that is  $c(=c')$ , and in situation 3  $r'(=r)$ , and it is not the case that  $c'=r$ . What one has to say, if one accepts the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle and wishes to regard both situations 1 and 3 as involving the reincarnation of Guy Fawkes, then, is that as used in situation 1 the name 'Guy Fawkes' designates *one* person, namely  $c(=c')$ , and as used in situation 3 it designates *another*, namely  $r'(=r)$ . Its designation in situation 2 is void for uncertainty.

This discussion should have made it clear how acceptance of the Only  $x$  and  $y$  principle is consistent with acceptance of both the modal principle of the necessity of identity and the possibility of reincarnation. The counter-intuitive consequences of a 'best candidate' approach are also avoided on this approach.

However, that is not to say that this approach, involving as it does the acceptance of the Multiple Occupancy Thesis, is without implausibilities of its own. On the contrary, the Multiple Occupancy Thesis itself undeniably goes against the grain of common-sense. But once again, the point that is relevant in the present context is that the Multiple Occupancy Thesis is not inconsistent with any *logical* principle, and in particular not inconsistent with the modal principle of the necessity of identity. Thus it is open to the believer in reincarnation, without logical inconsistency, to accept this approach to personal identity as an alternative to the 'best candidate' approach.

## VI

In summary, then, the possibility of reincarnation cannot be ruled out by a mere appeal to logic as MacIntosh claims. For there are, in fact, at least two logically consistent accounts of personal identity which can accommodate the possibility of reincarnation. However, neither of these accounts can be claimed by its supporters to be in accordance with our common-sense beliefs about personal identity. How to evaluate this fact and which, if either, of the two rival views to prefer, are questions which are currently hotly debated in the philosophical literature on personal identity.

*University of Birmingham,  
England*