Book Review

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Personal Identity: Complex or Simple?, edited by Georg Gasser and Matthias Stefan, is more than a collection of original articles written by some leading figures on that issue. It is one of the most important contributions within the contemporary debate in analytic philosophy on personal identity published in the last 20 years.

The volume is a collection of 12 articles (plus one reply) on personal identity, involving a number of different topics such as the metaphysics of human beings, the constitutive criteria of personal identity, and persistence over time. The articles are grouped into three sections and are prefaced by a complete and clearly argued introduction to the general problem (by Georg Gasser and Mathias Stefan). Besides the impressive variety of issues covered by the contributors, the connecting thread of the collection remains the distinction between "simple" and "complex" views about personal identity, and hence the fundamental *simplicity/complexity of personal identity over time*. Roughly put, a complex view considers personal identity as being made up of something else, while a simple view takes personal identity as irreducible to any simpler relation or consisting in anything but itself. Our being fundamentally either complex or simple entities represents in other terms the key question of the whole volume.

In the first section, "Framing the question", David Barnett, Eric T. Olson, Ryan Wasserman, and Harold W. Noonan deal with the very meaning of "complexity" and "simplicity" applied to personal identity, and draw a valuable taxonomy of the different complex and simple accounts of personal persistence.

In the second section, "Arguments for and against simplicity", Richard Swinburne, Sydney Shoemaker, E. J. Lowe, and Martine Nida-Rümelin, discuss whether any informative condition might be metaphysically constitutive of personal identity over time, each arguing for one side of the simplicity/complexity dichotomy.[1]

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[1] In particular, on the one hand Swinburne, Lowe and Nida-Rümelin support a simple account of personal identity, respectively by accepting a strong form of mind-body dualism (Swinburne), by rejecting any criterion of identity for persons as individual substances (Lowe), and by

Finally, the four essays within the section "Reconsidering simplicity" – by Lynne Rudder Baker, Christian Kanzian, Dean Zimmerman, and Hud Hudson – advance innovative arguments in support of the non-analyzability of personal identity, and in defense of a renewed simple approach.

Among all these fascinating contributions, I would like to focus on the characterization of the distinction between complex and simple views, in Olson's "In search of the simple view", which is a paradigmatic example of how to frame a philosophical problem without any preconceptions. Olson's conclusion is particularly challenging for it seems to reject the entire conceptual framework of the volume, by rejecting the very possibility of a determinate characterization of the distinction between complex and simple views on personal identity. If Olson is right that no characterization of the simple/complex dualism is satisfactory then much of the discussion about personal persistence needs to be reframed:

> The trouble is not merely that there are hard cases – views of personal identity that resist classification as either simple or complex – but that no answer even gets all the easy cases right. [...] If there is such a doctrine as the simple view, it is certainly not what we thought it was. The debate over personal identity has been systematically misdescribed (pp. 44–45).

Olson argues in particular against a traditional description of the complex/simple distinction drawn in terms of the existence or nonexistence of any constitutive criterion of personal identity over time. According to this kind of account (endorsed, among others, by Noonan)[2] the distinction between complex and simple views could be reduced to a dispute over the existence of a somewhat *informative*, *necessary* and *sufficient* condition for diachronic personal identity, i. e. a completion (Φ) of the formula

(1)   necessarily, if x is a person at time t and y exists at another time t*, x = y *if and only if (Φ)*

where (Φ) does not presuppose the identity it is meant to give conditions for.

In other words, personal identity would be complex if some other facts (e. g. memory, consciousness, bodily continuity, etc.) can serve as the informative,

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pointing out our being directly and non-conceptually aware of ourselves as subjects of experience. On the other hand, Shoemaker defends his famous neo-Lockean theory of personal identity that rejecting any circularity objection, maintains that it is the relation between conscious states of a person that constitutes their belonging «to one and the same person» (p. 133).

2 See Noonan (2003, 94–95).

necessary and sufficient conditions for personal persistence; while it would be simple if the only necessary and sufficient conditions (Φ) that might correctly complete (1) are *trivial* and *uninformative*. Following such an account, the complex/simplex dichotomy would be reduced to the distinction between *Criterialism* and *Anti-Criterialism* about personal identity. Criterialism maintains that there is some informative completion of formula (1), while Anti-Criterialism claims that the only true version of formula (1) is:

(1a)   necessarily, if x is a person at time t and y exists at another time t⋆, x = y *if and only if x = y.*[3]

In order to reject such a widely accepted characterization of the complex/simple view, Olson points out that some accounts of personal persistence that are intuitively classified as "simple" are nonetheless "criterialist". He considers, in particular, the "Cartesian approach" about personal identity – endorsed for instance by Swinburne[4] – whose core idea seems to be that x at t and y at t⋆ are the same person if and only if *they have the same soul*. According to Olson, an appeal to the condition of "having the same soul" must count as a criterion of personal identity in virtue of its being far from trivial (since it tells «us something about human people in particular», presupposing moreover the existence of souls), or uninformative (since it does not presuppose the identity it ought to explain, for «one need not know whether x is y before knowing whether x has y's soul» (p. 50)).

     Nevertheless, Olson claims that the Cartesian view is not usefully counted as complex because it does not give conditions for personal identity involving psychological or physical continuity of any sort. For this reason, it seems that the simplicity of personal identity cannot be accurately explained by the lack of any informative condition constituting personal persistence. Thus, according to Olson, we are better off setting aside the simple/complex dichotomy and focusing instead on the distinction between criterialist and anti-criterialist accounts of personal persistence, and the existence of any informative and constitutive condition (Φ) that makes the formula (1) true.

     Although I agree with Olson that we should focus on the existence of criteria of personal identity over time, there are two possible lines of response to his argument that are worth pointing out.

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3 Where the condition "x = y" represents the *simplest*, *trivial*, and *uninformative* condition for diachronic identity.
4 See Swinburne (1984).

First, I wonder whether the "soul-based account" of personal identity over time actually produces a problematic tension between Criterialism and simplicity. If on the one hand we accept Olson's claim that Cartesianism *is* a proper criterion of personal identity, I do not understand why we should take Cartesianism as a simple, instead of a complex view.[5] This kind of solution might appear unconvincing, but it would be perfectly consistent, disentangling the *simplicity-cum-criteria* tension within a dualist account.

On the other hand, another way to solve the discordance pointed out by Olson may consist in claiming that Cartesianism *is a kind of* Anti-Criterialism (even if in a "weak sense").[6] One might refuse to grant that a soul-based condition of identity over time represents a proper criterion for personal identity, by maintaining that it is an *uninformative* condition. In particular, even though the condition is not trivial (since it tells something about the way we persist), one might argue that a soul-based condition lacks any concrete informative aspects, since it presupposes an *a priori* identification of the essence of human persons with their souls. In other words, by presupposing that a human person *is* a human soul, the soul-based condition would end up being uninformative, even if this ontological fact itself is neither transparent nor obvious.[7] Here is an analogy: saying that Hesperus is Phosphorus does not count as an informative astronomical account of what Hesperus is *qua* heavenly body, even if the identity claim is non-trivial.[8] On the same way, saying that x at t and y at t* are the same if and only if they have the same soul does not count as an informative account of personal identity over time, even if the identity between a person and his soul is non-trivial.

As things currently stand, I do not think Olson's argument does enough to undermine the plausibility of characterizing the complex/simple distinction in terms of the criterialist/anti-criterialist distinction.

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5 On that point, see the account given by Noonan of Swinburne's approach in his essay (pp. 86–87).

6 Speaking about a "weak Anti-Criterialism", I would like to distinguish it from some kinds of "strong Anti-Criterialism" – supported for instance in Merricks (1998) – according to which personal identity is *absolutely unanalyzable* and *primitive.*

7 Given the controversial relation between epistemology and ontology, I am not going to deal with the epistemological argument for the uninformative-ness of the soul-based condition. Roughly said, this argument claims that the soul-based condition of personal identity over time is nothing but an *ad hoc*, *uninformative* solution to the persistence question, since we would need to know whether x and y are the same person before we could know whether they have the same soul, and since no characterization in terms of (at least in principle) observable facts appears conceivable.

8 I am grateful to Shea Musgrave for the analogy.

Second, I think that Olson's argument does not exclude the possibility of at least partly characterizing the complex/simple distinction in terms of the existence of constitutive conditions of personal persistence. Indeed, even accepting that the general division between complex and simple views on personal identity does not correspond to the debate over the existence of informative criteria, it seems reasonable that the former debate *at least includes* the latter, even if it is not reducible to it. It is reasonable to think that the distinction between complex and simple views can be represented in several possible ways, *one of which* is the dispute over the existence of criteria for personal identity over time.

Of course, one may reply that a "plural characterization" of the complex/simple distinction does not solve Olson's worries, as it just makes the division even more complicated. However, no single characterization of the distinction appears to be immune to counterexamples. Take for example a Parfitian account of this division, which takes complex views to be a form of *reductionism*.[9] According to this view, a complex approach claims that personal identity is reducible to more fundamental properties and relations (among memories, for example), while a simple view denies any reduction of this sort. But consider the so-called "first-personal approach",[10] where personal identity is understood in terms of the persistence of a conscious first-person perspective. Since there is no other way to characterize one's first-person perspective than through one's first-person perspective, and the notion of a first-person perspective presupposes personal identity (i. e., it is the conscious perspective of a person), this condition cannot figure in a truly reductive analysis and thus the account would be "simple" on the Parfitian version of the distinction.

However, I find it rather misleading to classify this sort of psychological account of persistence as simple. Because it analyzes personal identity over time in terms of determinate psychological features it should be classified as complex, regardless of whether these psychological features themselves can be further analyzed. The condition itself may be simple, but personal identity is not if it can be characterized in distinctively psychological terms.

Because no single account seems to be adequate, I think we cannot rule out the possibility of explaining the complex/simple distinction in terms of different (and somewhat overlapping) characterizations, one of which might be Parfitian. However, I agree with Olson on one important idea: focusing on the problem of criteria, and hence on the existence of any informative, necessary and sufficient

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9 See Parfit (1982, 227), and then Zimmerman's essay in the volume here reviewed (pp. 206–207).
10 On that issue, see Baker's remarkable essay in this collection (pp. 179–191), whose psychological account of personal persistence is explained in terms of "enjoying first-person thoughts".

condition for personal identity over time, represents the best way to handle the persistence question.

Finally, I would like to point out another interesting aspect of the book, namely the increased appreciation it demonstrates towards simple (anti-criterialist) accounts of personal identity over time, an approach that has been somewhat disparaged in the past decades within the philosophical debate in favor of criterialist accounts of personal persistence. In this volume, most contributors appear sympathetic towards a simple account of personal persistence and offer several arguments in favor of it. These include Wasserman's indeterminacy argument (p. 63ff), Swinburne's dualistic and soul-based account of persistence (p. 105ff), Lowe's defense of a substantialist approach that treats persons as unanalyzable in virtue of their being "simple substances", or "selves" (p. 137ff), Nida-Rümmelin's account of the fundamental role of a direct, non-conceptual awareness of ourselves as subjects of experience (p. 157ff); and Kanzian's denial of any reduction of person to a "sortal term" (p. 192ff).

Personal Identity: Complex or Simple? represents an extraordinary contribution to the metaphysics of personal identity. It succeeds in bringing together some traditional opponents within the contemporary debate and will contribute to the continued persistence of interest in the metaphysics of personal identity by offering some innovative arguments for old positions alongside novel perspectives. It will no doubt be a work of fundamental importance for any future research on the metaphysics of personhood.

References

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