

Review

Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006

In this extraordinarily rich and provocative book by an eminent intellectual historian and philosopher, Richard Sorabji argues persuasively that there was “an intense preoccupation” among ancient western thinkers with self and related notions. In the process, he provides fresh translations and often novel interpretations of the most important passages relevant to this contention in a host of thinkers, including Homer, Epicharmus, Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Chrysippus, Cicero, Lucretius, Seneca, Plutarch, Epictetus, Hierocles, Marcus Aurelius, Tertullian, Origen, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Plotinus, Porphyry, Methodius, Themistius, Augustine, and Proclus, among others.

Sorabji’s nuanced, insightful, and often novel interpretations of passages from these and other writers are invariably woven together in an illuminating way, often with an eye to modern developments. There is no other book that covers the classical western material on self and related notions anywhere near as thoroughly or as perceptively. As a consequence for decades to come this book is destined to be a major point of departure for future discussion of classical authors on such issues. That in itself

is enough to make it an extraordinary resource for philosophers and classicists. But there is more.

Sorabji argues convincingly that when it comes to modern philosophical discussions of self, while it may not be quite true that there is nothing new under the sun, there is much less new than is usually supposed. For instance, he finds a narrative account of the self in Plutarch and passages in Chrysippus and Philo that prefigure some of the issues that arose in our own times in connection with fission examples. And in his chapter devoted to Locke, tellingly entitled “Memory: Locke’s return to Epicureans and Stoics,” he begins by noting that Locke almost surely read certain passages in *De Rerum Natura* in which Lucretius discusses whether one should be concerned about the sufferings of a replica of oneself, and then goes on to explain how the Stoic idea that “each person is attached (Latin in Seneca: *conciliari*) to his or her bodily parts, and to his or her current constitution” anticipates much that Locke had to say:

A common English paraphrase is that each person *appropriates* his or her body, and this is fitting because the Greek word *oikeiōsis* is connected with *oikos*, the household, and the verb *oikeioun* would literally mean accepting into the household, accepting as one’s own. Locke, we shall see, talks both of appropriation and of reconciling. . . . [The] Stoics, Chrysippus and Seneca, [also]

explain the idea of attachment . . . [as does] the Stoic Hierocles . . . (p104).

This passage, I think, captures the flavor of many of Sorabji's not just erudite, but deeply erudite discussions of modern thinkers, in each of which he invariably displays an excellent feel for what is historically plausible.

But Sorabji does not rest content with doing intellectual history. He also argues forcefully for the reality of the self. By a "person," he says, "I mean someone who *has* psychological states, and *does* things," which he says "can be summed up by saying that a person *owns* psychological states and actions" (p21). In this part of what he has to say, his foil is Parfitian reductionism, which he challenges not to argue for an immaterial self (or person), but for an embodied one. Sorabji argues that self-referential, indexicals—"I-thoughts"—not only "have a unique action- and emotion-guiding force," but actually enter into our perceptions, helping not only to guide, but actually "to constitute, many of our emotions, the fear of death being only one" (p22). He concludes "that there needs to be an owner of experiences," and not just because we talk that way, "but for deeper metaphysical reasons." The only plausible owner, he says, is "the embodied person" (p267).

In Sorabji's view, "the basic difficulty" with Parfitian reductionism, is that it treats

talk of ownership as a *façon de parler* that adds nothing, or at least nothing of importance, to the reductive components of a person (p267). On the contrary, Sorabji claims, talk of ownership not only does add information of importance, but ownership relations are real. Without ever committing himself to materialism, he nevertheless appears to be arguing for a kind of non-reductive materialism about selves (or persons). But he does not call his overall position *non-reductive materialism* or even say much more about what it is than I have explained.

Sorabji does, though, argue at length that *talk* about people *owning* (i.e., *having*) their experiences and *owning* (i.e., *performing*) their actions is an ineliminable feature of the ways we do and should think about agency and ethics, that this by itself creates a presumption in favor of the reality of such ownership relations, and that one cannot make sense of talk of ownership on a reductive view. In contrast to Parfitian reductionism, in which persons (or selves) are reduced to a “stream of psycho-physical events” each of which is unified “not [by] its belonging to one owner, but its occurring in one body or brain,” Sorabji claims that what unifies such a stream is precisely its belonging to one owner (p269). On his way to this conclusion he succeeds in showing that there are difficulties with Parfit’s view, not the least of which is the extraordinary

importance of “I-thoughts” to talk about agency and ethics. His having shown this is an accomplishment. However, if the thrust of his argument is correct, then there are serious problems not just with Parfit’s view, but with reductionism in general. One might question how far Sorabji’s argument go toward establishing this more general result.

Consider, for instance, his claim that Parfitian reductionism lacks the resources it needs to link together the putative components of any given “stream” so as to distinguish it from other streams (p269). He defends this claim by pointing out that since Parfit allows that teletransportation preserves ownership he cannot replace “belonging to a single owner” with “occurs in a single brain or body.” True enough. But one could still retain the spirit of Parfit’s view by specifying a more complicated *stream-relation* that would warrant talk of belonging to a single owner not only in normal circumstances but also in cases of teletransportation. Sorabji does not argue that it would be impossible to specify such a relation, just that Parfit hasn’t done it. I know of no reason to think that it would be impossible. In fact, it seems to me highly likely that if one does not simply give the back of one’s hand to the idea that an individual psycho-physical stream and, with it, unique ownership might be preserved through teletransportation, one could specify circumstances that might link pre- and post- teletransported persons so as plausibly to

preserve these ideas. It's hard to see how merely *saying* that the body/brain that emerges at the end of a process of teletransportation *owns* (or does not own) the earlier body/brain's experiences would be a better alternative to an account that specifies such circumstances. For merely saying that the teletransported replica *owns* (or does not own) the experiences of its ancestors would not *explain* or *justify* anything, whereas specifying the nature of the psycho-physical components of a "stream," including the relevant causal dependencies among its components, would *explain* what the relationship between the teletransported replica and its ancestors actually is in virtue of which one might (or might not) *justifiably* regard them as belonging to a single psycho-physical stream in a way that would warrant talk of the replica as the owner of previous experiences and actions.

Of course, if one is a substance dualist, one might, albeit vacuously, try to ground ownership relations differently. But there is no indication that Sorabji is a dualist. For materialists, other than the factual data specified in some such psycho-physical stream-relation (perhaps a more robust one than Parfit imagined that countenanced not only bodily and psychological components, but even social connections), there is no other relevant factual data to which one might appeal to explain and justify talk of ownership.

Hence, however necessary the notion of ownership might be for practical purposes, talk of the *reality* of ownership strikes me as more honorific than truly substantive. One can, if one likes, confer the honor and say that the owning relationship is real. But merely saying this does not reduce one iota the justificatory and explanatory dependence of the owning relationship on some sort of “stream relationship.” So, I cannot see that much hinges on whether one says that the ownership relation is real.

This becomes especially apparent if one reflects that there is not just one ownership relation in which persons are intimately involved, but many. Compare, for instance, the following ownership relations: *my* house, *my* bodily parts, *my* joy (or sadness), *my* bodily movements, *my* actions, and *my* history. Each of these sorts of ownership is important to the ways we think about persons. Yet since we would have to appeal to *different* facts to explain and justify ownership relations of each of these sorts there seems to be little reason to think that each of the *my*'s in the list expresses the same relation. And if they express different relations, then *merely saying* that one *owns* something cannot be the end of the story.

What, then, is the rest of the story? Sorabji argues that if there is a rest of the story, Parfit has not discovered it. But other than distinguishing among ownership-

predicates, such as material-possession-ownership, bodily-part-ownership, experience-ownership, bodily-movement-ownership, bodily-action-ownership, history-ownership, and so on, each of which is then accepted as primitive, how plausible is it that there's no rest of the story? Not very, it seems to me. It's difficult to imagine how there could not be more to the story than this, and the only candidates for such a fuller account point toward reductive information, including the sorts to which Parfit draws attention.

Consider, for instance, Sorabji's attempt to show that "a person's activities are linked together in a far greater variety of contexts than the few that Parfit considers," and that in this greater range of cases "normally the linkage involves the idea of same owner" (p270). In defending this point, he appeals to the suggestion, advanced by Marya Schechtman, that "duration is required for talking, listening, walking, acting, having beliefs, desires, goals, intentions, thinking," and so on, as, say, when "the individual words of a spoken sentence are understood as a combined whole" (pp270-71). While it is undoubtably true that at the folk-psychological level such feats may evoke the idea of same owner, it is important to remember that each of them is accomplished by various bodily parts, including especially a human brain. In the case of hearing and understanding language, for instance, the words that a brain "hears" are

physiologically encoded by the time they reach the brain and then somehow knit together in the brain by neuronal activity. Currently no one knows enough to say what this knitting together involves or how it is accomplished. But surely there is a neurophysiological story there waiting to be told. Merely saying that the experiences of hearing a succession of individual words were had *by the same owner* does not take us far in *explaining* how the knitting together is accomplished. Sorabji does not claim that talk of ownership does explain this. But he also doesn't acknowledge that seemingly only the neurophysiological story could explain it and that with that neurophysiological story in hand a Parfit-like account of distinctive psycho-physical streams might well be fleshed out. Talk of ownership may be the best we can do now, and it may even be essential at the level of folk psychological accounts of agency and ethics, but in the case of this example all that a reductive approach—if not Parfit's, then some other—requires is acceptance of the idea, which seems quite plausible, that there is some more fine-grained account that makes no appeal to the notion of ownership and that does explain how the knitting together takes place.

Sorabji further objects to Parfit's view on the grounds that the bodily and psychological events to which he tries to reduce talk of ownership may themselves be further reduced, apparently *ad infinitum* (in support of this point, Sorabji defends certain [19]

criticisms of Nyaya Hindus against Buddhist reductionists (pp278-97)). It is true that there is a puzzle about where, if anywhere, and why just there, any sort of reductive view, including one like Parfit's, should stop the reduction. But if one decides to take the ownership relation as primitive and unanalyzable, puzzles do not vanish. For why should the refusal to reduce to a level that one needs to appeal to anyway in order to explain and justify whether in unusual circumstances ownership relations obtain be any less puzzling than not knowing where to stop a reduction?

Sorabji has other arguments as well, too many to consider here. The reservations that I have with many of them are like those I have with the arguments considered above. They are not so much problems with Sorabji's narrower objections to Parfit's views or problems with non-reductionism per se, although some of them may be partly that, as they are with the view that *ownership* relations are real in any stronger sense than would be warranted by the following claim: for practical purposes we need to talk as if ownership relations are real and currently there is no known reductive account that would enable us to dispense with all such talk. But perhaps Sorabji does not wish to claim that ownership relations are real in any stronger sense than this.

In spite of such reservations as I have expressed about Sorabji's case for the reality of ownership relations, his accomplishments in this book are outstanding. He has

illuminated areas of classical scholarship that were previously dark, shown that many of the concerns of ancient authors about the self and related notions are perennial concerns, and made provocative and insightful contributions to contemporary personal identity theory. That is enough to make this book an extraordinary accomplishment. Anyone interested in the history and/or contemporary theory of the self and related notions would profit from reading it.*

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