

# What? Me Worry?: Selves, Cohabitation and the Problem of the Many

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## Introduction

According to what Rebecca Roach calls *the common-sense view* what matters for survival is identity.<sup>1</sup> Parfit has challenged this view, citing cases in which identity is interrupted but we should say that persons nevertheless survive. If, for example, I were to divide into two persons, each psychologically continuous with me now, I should regard this as survival even though I cannot, logically, be identical with both of my successors.

Roach suggests that David Lewis' response to Parfit in defense of the common-sense view fails because, given the character of persons involved in branching cases, we cannot infer that what matters for their survival is what matters for us. While pre-fission stage-sharing allows persons to survive fission, such cases tell us nothing about what matters for survival for ordinary people or about the correctness of the common-sense view.

The puzzle cases on which Parfit and Lewis rely force us to reflect on the nature of our concern for our future survival. According to Roach, however, we cannot have such concern in the requisite sense if our survival is guaranteed. Since the survival of individuals involved in fission cases is guaranteed through fission, the claims, they cannot be concerned about their survival in the requisite sense.

I argue however that given the criterion for individuating persons and the account of self-interested concern she assumes, both ordinary people and those destined to undergo fission are in the same boat. Our survival, like theirs, is guaranteed but given any reasonable understanding of self-interested concern, neither we nor they should be sanguine about that. To the extent that we are concerned about our futures and, in particular, about our future survival our concern is the same.

## Guaranteed survival!

On Lewis' account, persons are to be understood as aggregates of person-stages. In a case of fission, two continuant persons share stages. They include overlapping temporal parts in the way that roads may share overlapping spatial parts for some stretch of their courses. Before fission such 'cohabiting' persons are indistinguishable but nevertheless distinct in virtue of their post-fission histories. Persons on Lewis' account are worms rather than slices and there are two persons involved in the fission case before as well as after branching.

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<sup>1</sup> [Rebecca Roach. "Fission, cohabitation and the concern for future survival." \*Analysis\* 2010 70\(2\):256-263](#)

Now Roach argues that individuals who undergo fission must, logically, survive fission because persons who share a pre-fission stage S, “owe their very existence to the fact that S fissions: if they exist at all, they survive until after fission.” Suppose fission had not occurred. Then there would have been just one person rather than two people all along. And *that* individual is not identical with either one of the cohabiting individuals involved in the fission case. If fission *hadn't* occurred than those two individuals would not have existed. Since they exist it follows that fission occurred. Since fission could not have occurred if they hadn't survived the fission it follows that they, those very individuals, logically *must* survive fission. Their survival, Roach argues, unlike that of ordinary people, ‘cannot be jeopardized.’

If we don't find this persuasive, she suggests, it is because even though their survival is guaranteed they are not in a position to *know* that it is. To know that would be to know at some time *t* prior to fission that one was half of a cohabiting pair of individuals *who are indiscernible at t* rather than a single normal individual. These individuals, destined to survive as continuer C1 and continuer C2, are indiscernible to one another as well as to ‘outsiders’: at *t*, prior to fission, if I am one of those persons I cannot know whether I am C1 or C2 or, indeed, whether I am C, the person who would have existed if fission had not occurred. So, I cannot know that my survival is guaranteed through fission.

Nevertheless, though guaranteed survival isn't terribly interesting if one doesn't know about it, the guarantee stands.

## Counterparts and possibilities

If we treat possibility in this way we are going to have to significantly restrict possibilities and multiply guarantees. Suppose I worry about the prospect of undergoing fission. If I don't in fact undergo fission then I have nothing to worry about because it would have been *impossible* for me to undergo fission. If fission had occurred then I would never have existed. There would have been two distinct individuals, indistinguishable from me at *t*, in my place. If fission does occur then I have even less reason to worry. In these circumstances I will be either C1 or C2, each of whose survival is guaranteed through fission.

This cheerful fatalism is a little too good to be true. On this account, at least when it comes to fission, things cannot go any differently for an individual from the way they go. This is what underwrites guaranteed survival.

The trouble is that the guaranteed survival thesis assumes an account of possibility that takes certain self-ascriptions in an overly literal sense. On this account when I say that something *could* be true of me at some future time I mean that the individual of which it will be true will be in the most literal sense *me*—and not, e.g., my closest continuer, counterpart or any other individual who is not exactly me. On Lewis' account, however, assessing such future possibilities will never merely involve consideration of how things will go for *me*. Rather, in my concern for how things will go I am wondering which of a large family of counterparts at nearby possible worlds I am. Right now I am in the same

predicament as C1 and C2 in the fission case: these counterparts are now indiscernible so I don't know which one I am. But the field will soon narrow as the future unfolds.

I worry about my forthcoming dental appointment (11am Aug 3). At my exam, Dr. Tulenko assured me that I needed extensive dental work so the possibilities are almost endless. Which tooth will she drill first? On Lewis' account, there is a legion of counterparts anticipating that appointment, each wondering which member of the legion they are. Speaking with the vulgar I say that I wonder what is going to happen *to me*. But in the strict and philosophical sense, on this account, I am not contemplating alternative futures *for myself* since, as a strictly world-bound individual there aren't alternative possibilities *for me*.

For each of these individuals, *que sera sera*: their possibilities are restricted and their futures are absolutely guaranteed. If I am one of the lucky individuals who gets off lightly at that dental appointment, nothing can jeopardize my good luck. I will not feel pain because if there were going to be someone in that dental chair who *does* feel pain, it would not be (in the strict and philosophical sense) *me*. In this way I am in the same position as Roache's cohabitants, C1 and C2, whose survival through fission cannot be jeopardized. However, it is hard to see why this state of affairs should preclude C1 and C2 from being properly concerned about their futures in the way that ordinary people are. Like me, they worry about of which, among a horde of possible individuals, they are. I worry about whether I am a person who cruises through the dental appointment without serious discomfort or one of the unlucky ones who has a nasty experience. C1 wonders whether he is one of the lucky individuals who survives fission or one of the unlucky ones who dies prior to the operation.

Roach notes that "there is a sense in which S's cohabitants can die before fission...and a sense in which they cannot...it is in the latter sense that...S's cohabitants cannot die before fission."<sup>2</sup> The sense in which S's cohabitants' survival is guaranteed is the sense in which lucky dental patients' good luck cannot be jeopardized. In the loose and popular sense, arguably the sense that counts when it comes to understanding ordinary people's ordinary concern about their future, both I and C1 have cause for concern. In any case, whether or not the loose and popular sense is what counts for understanding concern about the future, on Lewis' account cohabiting individuals and ordinary people are in the same boat.

## Identity and the problem of the many

But maybe we should regard this as a defect of Lewis' counterpart theory—on more reason for the incredulous stare. We might worry that it undermines the possibility of genuinely self-interested concern about the future since on this account I never really wonder what will happen to me; rather, strictly and philosophically speaking, I wonder who I am. So much the worse for counterpart theory.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

While I do not think that there is a shred of plausibility in this objection, even if there were it would cut no ice. Suppose we reject counterpart theory. Suppose we hold that it is *possible* that the very same individual (in the strict and philosophical sense) have any one of a variety of different fates. One fate that an individual *cannot* have even on this account, short of violating transitivity of identity, is that of becoming two distinct individuals. That is what gives fission cases their bite. So, returning to the fission case Roache describes, if we understand persons as space-time worms, we are still going to have to say that the survival of C1 and C2 is guaranteed through fission. C, the individual who would have existed if fission had not occurred could not himself have become C1 and C2. If fission occurs, he is *replaced* by C1 and C2.

But what of ordinary individual who do not undergo fission, or fusion, on this account? If allow for transworld identity we can allow that the futures of individuals may go differently from the way they actually go. But there is a limit. Suppose once again we understand persons as worms rather than stages so that a normal individual is an aggregate of person-stages, the earliest of which is a stage at the time of his birth  $\pm$  a few months and the latest is the stage just prior to the time of his death.

Suppose C, a normal individual who does not undergo either fission or fusion, lasts from  $t$  to  $t'$ . Now consider  $C^*$ , an individual who coincides with C from  $t$  to  $t^* < t'$ . C is not identical with  $C^*$ . Unless there is some non-standard way out, given necessity of identity, C *could* not be identical with  $C^*$ . This is the familiar Problem of the Many as it manifests itself in connection with problems of identity-through-time when we take the view that ordinary things are best understood as space-time worms, which have temporal proper parts. We really, really do not want to say that where we, speaking with the vulgar, recognize one person there are strictly speaking continuum many overlapping persons, including C,  $C^*$  and many, many more.

We can avoid overpopulation by stipulating that the only persons involved in such cases are *maximal* R-interrelated aggregates of person-states, where the R-relation is the temporal unity relation for person, the relation that holds on two person-stages when they are stages of the same person. In that case,  $C^*$  will not be a person but, at best, a mere proto-person: an aggregate of person stages that *would* be a person if it were maximal, that is, if there were no additional person-stages that were R-related to any stage it includes.

However if we understand persons in this way then the survival of ordinary persons, like the survival of those involved in branching cases, is guaranteed. Suppose C is alive at  $t'$  and  $C^*$  is a proper part of C that lasts from  $t$  to  $t^*$ . C is a person but  $C^*$  is not a person since he is not maximal.  $C \neq C^*$  since  $C^*$  is a proper part of C.

Could C have died before  $t'$  at, e.g.  $t^*$ ? I don't see how. Consider C-minus- $C^*$ , the aggregate of stages that belong to C but not to  $C^*$ . If C were to die at  $t^*$  he would miss out on C-minus- $C^*$  stages. But then his history would include all and only those stages that belonged to  $C^*$ . And so he would *be*  $C^*$ . But that is impossible.  $C^*$  is a proper part of C and so  $C^*$  is not identical to C. Therefore, by necessity of identity, it is not possible that C

be C\*. So C cannot die at t\*! C's survival past t\* is therefore guaranteed in just the way and for just the same reasons that the survival of C1 and C2 through fission is guaranteed!<sup>3</sup>

Like all normal persons, C is concerned about his survival. But his survival is guaranteed in just the way that the survival of C1 and C2 through fission is guaranteed. If something had happened to result in the death of an individual who shared C's stages prior to t\* then C would not have existed! If C exists then his survival through t\* and, indeed, his survival to t' is guaranteed.

Can C be properly concerned about his future survival given that it is, in this sense, guaranteed and cannot be jeopardized? Well, he can be concerned in the very same way and to the very same extent, that ordinary persons like you can me can be concerned because he is an ordinary, non-fissioning person. But his concern about future survival is the same kind of concern that other individuals whose survival cannot be jeopardized, including the personnel of fission cases, exhibit.

Once again the story is the same. Individuals who undergo fission and ordinary people are in the same boat. In the strict and philosophical sense *our* survival, like theirs, is guaranteed so *their* concern about their future survival is all of a piece with our concern about our future survival. Given that in both cases future survival is guaranteed to a point maybe neither of us should be worried. More likely both we ordinary people and individuals who undergo fission should be worried since in both cases individuals should be concerned about which people they are. But if I am correct, then one way or the other, ordinary people and the personnel of fission cases should have the same concerns. Therefore, contrary to Roache's claim that, in fission cases, "cohabitants cannot properly be concerned for their future survival in the way that ordinary people are" goes by the board.

## Should we be concerned about future survival?

Should we worry about our future survival? If I am correct then whether we should worry or not, we ordinary people have no more or less reason to worry than do individuals who undergo fission. Our survival is guaranteed in just the same respect that their's is; their concern for their future survival is the same in character as ours is. If this is correct then Roache hadn't succeeded in driving the wedge between ordinary people and the characters in puzzle cases of fission as she claims.

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<sup>3</sup> Yeah. Could C die *prior* to t\*? By the same reasoning, not. Consider a proper part of C consisting of stages from t to t# < t\*. Run the same argument. C#, the individual that consists of stages of C between t and t# is a proper part of C and so not identical to C. By necessity of identity, it is not possible that C be identical to C#. But that is what would happen if C were to die at t#. So C *can't* die at t# or, for the same reasons, at any time other than t'. C's survival is guaranteed to that time. The good news is that he cannot die sooner; the bad news is that he cannot die later.