

Personal Identity, Agency and the Multiplicity Thesis

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Abstract I consider whether there is a plausible conception of personal identity that can accommodate the ‘Multiplicity Thesis’ (MT), the thesis that some ways of creating and deploying multiple distinct online personae can bring about the existence of multiple persons where before there was only one. I argue that an influential Kantian line of thought, according to which a person is a unified locus of rational agency, is well placed to accommodate the thesis. I set out such a line of thought as developed by Carol Rovane, and consider the conditions that would have to be in place for the possibility identified by MT to be realised. Finally I briefly consider the prospects for MT according to neo-Lockean and animalist views of personhood.

Keywords Agency · Animalism · Dissociative identity disorder · Internet addiction · MMOGs · Neo-Lockeanism · Personal identity

Introduction

Now more than ever, the internet affords countless opportunities for users to create multiple, customisable and disposable personae and profiles for themselves online. Virtual environments such as Second Life, expansive multiplayer online games, social and professional networking sites and a multitude of discussion spaces and fora all provide opportunities to create profiles that can overlap with or remain distinct from each other, harmonize or conflict with the user’s self-representations in other online and offline domains, and bear greater or lesser similarity to the appearance and conduct of the user’s worldly, corporeal self. How should such phenomena bear upon our thinking about questions of personhood and selfhood?

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A number of sociologists and anthropologists interested in such phenomena have suggested that a revision of our intuitive conceptions of personal identity and integrity is called for. For example, reporting an interview with Doug, a student in his early 20s who spends several hours a day inhabiting multiple virtual environments, using multiple distinct personae, Sherry Turkle writes:

Doug talks about playing his characters in windows, and says that using windows has made it possible for him to ‘turn pieces of my mind on and off’: ‘I split my mind. I’m getting better at it. I can see myself as being two or three or more. And I just turn on one part of my mind and then another when I go from window to window ... RL [real life] is just one more window, and it’s not usually my best one.’ (Turkle 1997, p. 13)

On the basis of numerous interviews with virtual world users such as Doug, Turkle suggests that such practices of assuming and moving between multiple separate personae, each with different relations to the others and to the worldly persona of the user, are creating a new, more flexible kind of selfhood. She concludes that:

In cyberspace, hundreds of thousands, perhaps already millions, of users create online personae who live in a diverse group of virtual communities where the routine formation of multiple identities undermines any notion of a real and unitary self. (Ibid, p. 267)

Turkle is not alone in this assessment. Moreover, the number and sophistication of the online spaces available for the creation of detailed and distinct personae, as well as the modes of expression, behaviour and interaction available to such personae, have increased enormously since the days of the text-only games and chatrooms that provided the context for Turkle’s views. What should a philosopher interested in personal identity make of such a conclusion?¹ Given its strongest reading (as we shall in what follows), the claim is this: *some ways of creating and deploying multiple distinct online personae can bring about the existence of several distinct persons where before there was only one*. Let us call this the Multiplicity Thesis (which I will sometimes abbreviate as ‘MT’ in what follows).² We find similar claims, made for different reasons, in Castells (1997) and Velleman (2008). What kinds of conception of personhood are consistent with the thesis being true? Are there any current philosophical views of personal identity that might support it? The goal of this paper is to explore these questions. Here is how we will proceed.

¹ Of course, the term ‘personal identity’ fails to cleanly pick out a single topic of inquiry for a philosopher to be interested in. See Olson (1997) for a survey of the various topics of investigation that might fall under that heading. The goal of a theory of personal identity of the kind in which I’m interested here is to spell out the essential properties that make some entity a person. A successful theory of this kind would supply materials to address other questions about persons and identity. For example, a specification of the essential conditions of personhood will frame an account of the persistence conditions of a person through time.

² I do not claim that Turkle explicitly endorses the Multiplicity Thesis. The scope and strength of the conclusions she wishes to draw for our conception of identity from our online practices appears to vary with context and the cases she discusses. This is not intended as a criticism of Turkle—providing a philosophically rigorous characterisation of the metaphysics of persons is simply not a concern that animates her work.

The next section sketches three different conceptions of personhood. The rest of the paper is chiefly devoted to arguing that one of these—the Kantian conception—allows for the possibility of MT’s truth. Section “[Rational Agency and Personhood](#)” outlines the Kantian view in greater detail, and section “[Rational Agency and Multiple Persons](#)” explains how that view allows for the possibility of multiple persons being embodied in a single organism. This will put us in a position to see, in section “[Rational Agency and the Multiplicity Thesis](#)”, how the Kantian view admits the possibility identified by MT—that online activity can bring about the existence of distinct persons. However, I will argue, even if we accept the truth of the Kantian view this possibility will only be realised in rare, and probably undesirable, cases. In section “[Neo-Lockeanism, Animalism and Multiplicity](#)” I return to the two alternative conceptions of personhood from section “[Three Approaches to Personhood](#)”, and consider their prospects for accommodating MT, before summarising the paper’s conclusions in section “[Conclusion](#)”.

Note that it is not my goal here to argue for the truth or falsity of MT, though the discussion of whether it can be accommodated by any standard philosophical conception of personal identity clearly has a bearing on the topic. Nor is it my goal to adjudicate between the various conceptions of personal identity I will consider. The aim is to better understand the conceptual relationship between a particular set of online practices and philosophical conceptions of personal identity. The hope is that we will emerge with a clearer understanding both of what might be involved in a philosophical treatment of personal identity online, and of the interest such topics might hold for philosophers interested in personal identity.

Three Approaches to Personhood

One way of grouping current views on personal identity is on the basis of the ways in which they elaborate upon or depart from Locke’s dictum that a person is:

a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places. (Locke 1650, II.27.9)

One family of views, the most influential member of which is set out and defended in Parfit (1986), holds that the moral to be drawn from Locke’s dictum is that a person is essentially a locus of *experience*—a sequence of conscious episodes held together by memory, anticipation and other forward and backward-looking intentional states. Call these views ‘neo-Lockean’.³ For such theorists, conscious experience thus “holds together in a single survey some of the specifics of the career, extended in time, of what the subject of this survey conceives as itself”

³ This is the most common use of ‘neo-Lockeanism’. However, Rovane (2006) uses the term differently so as to include any account of personhood that allows for a dissociation between personal and animal identity of the kind that Locke’s example of the Prince and cobbler might be thought to provide. See McDowell (1997) for an argument that the possibility of such distinction is not central to Locke’s position.

(McDowell 1997, p. 230).⁴ Upon this conception of experience, consciousness implicitly involves the reflexive grasp of the subject's persistence through time that Locke makes criterial of personhood. One way such a view can be motivated is via consideration of hypothetical cases where continuity of consciousness and continuity of bodily life comes apart. So when Locke asks us to consider the case of the Prince whose consciousness comes to animate the body of a cobbler, we are invited by neo-Lockeans to conclude that the person that is the Prince is now situated in the body of the cobbler—the person has moved with the transferred consciousness rather than stayed behind in the Princely body.⁵

An opposing family of views holds that a person is essentially a locus of *agency*—a network of overlapping and interlocking plans, projects and preferences that converge upon the single practical standpoint occupied by the agent. Call these 'Kantian' views. On such views, the unity and continuity that is characteristic of a person's life is not a matter of unified and continuous consciousness, but of the rational unity of the agent's goals and plans, and the way such goals and plans are simultaneously informed by the agent's past and directed toward her present and future. Upon this conception of agency, the reason and reflection that Locke makes criterial of personhood is *practical*, and a person's capacity to consider herself as the same thinking thing through space and time falls out of her status as a unified locus of practical reason. When thinking through Locke's case of the Prince and the cobbler from this Kantian perspective, to decide the location of the person that is the Prince after the transfer of consciousness, we must consider where the locus of his agency resides. Are the plans, projects and preferences that are now pursued with the cobbler's body suitably rationally related to those formerly pursued with the body of the Prince? If we decide that the case presents us with an unbroken trajectory of practical reasoning that differs from that of a normally embodied agent only by encompassing the actions of two separate bodies, then we should rule that the person who is the Prince occupies the cobbler's body after the switch.⁶

A third family of views holds that a person is essentially some specific kind of animal—perhaps one that leads some specific kind of animal life. The continuation of a person is thus the continuation of a specific animal life. These 'animalists' will either deny that Locke's dictum presents us with an essential feature of persons, or hold that the capacities which Locke makes criterial of personhood are essential to our nature as animals. When considering the case of the prince and the cobbler, the most natural diagnosis for an animalist will be that the person who is the Prince remains where the Prince's body is, although his psychology undergoes a sudden and dramatic change. Similarly, that the cobbler's body is now inhabited by the consciousness of a Prince will not prompt the animalist to say that it has housed two people over the course of its existence. Rather, they will hold, it has housed one

⁴ Note that McDowell is atypical among neo-Lockeans in being a non-reductivist about persons. That is, he does not think that the essential properties of persons can be specified in psychological terms which are essentially independent of the animal life in which they are involved. See the brief discussion of animalism, below.

⁵ See also Shoemaker (1959, 2008) and Lewis (1976) for examples of the neo-Lockean view.

⁶ See Rovane (1998, 2004, 2006), Korsgaard (1989, 2009), Hurley (1998) and MacIntosh (1993) for Kantian views of personhood.

person with an unusual and troubled psychological career. If Locke's hypothetical case is made more concrete by imagining it as involving a partial or total brain transplant, an alternative diagnosis is that the human life of the Prince is now continued in (most of) the body of the cobbler, and thus that:

we should conceive of what happens as a body transplant for the human being – and person – who is the Prince, not as a brain – and personal consciousness – transplant for the human being who is the cobbler. (McDowell 2006, p. 115)

Which option the animalist pursues will depend on whether they identify persons with animals *qua* biological organisms or *qua* the leaders of a specific kind of life.⁷

We will return briefly to the neo-Lockean and animalist views in section “[Neo-Lockeanism, Animalism and Multiplicity](#)”. I now turn to the chief aim of this paper: establishing my claim that it is the second, Kantian, view that provides the best conceptual framework for making sense of the Multiplicity Thesis. To see why, we must examine an instance of that view in more detail.

Rational Agency and Personhood

There are many possible ways of cashing out the Kantian claim that persons are unified centers of rational agency. However, so long as the notion of rational agency employed is not conceptually dependent upon the capacities and properties appealed to by neo-Lockeans or animalists, there will be possible cases where our individuations of persons dissociate from our individuations of seats of consciousness and the lives of biological organisms. Thus,

If we are prepared to conceive persons as reflective rational agents, then we shall see that the condition of their identity is not the condition in which there is a single consciousness. A single agent can incorporate many distinct consciousnesses, and a single consciousness can be the site of many distinct agents. So, even if consciousness is necessarily tied to animal life in the deepest possible way, it doesn't follow that the life of a person is. There can be multiple persons within a single human being and, also, group persons composed of many human beings. (Rovane 2006, p. 101)

On such a view, the circumstances where consciousness or animality can come apart from personhood will be fixed by the conditions we identify as constitutive of reflective rational agency. Since Carol Rovane has devoted the most thought to how Kantian views of persons bear on the possibility of multiple agents being embodied within a single human, I will focus on the conditions provided by her account (Rovane 1998, 2004, 2006). What follows is a compressed description of those conditions, which are described and argued for in detail in Rovane (1998, 2004).

Firstly, agents must manifest appropriate sensitivity to the force of the rational norms that govern their behaviour. That is, it is not enough for their behaviour to conform to, or be interpretable in the light of, the norms of rationality. Agents must

⁷ For the former kind of animalism see Olson (1997, 2007). For the latter, see McDowell (1997, 2006).

also grasp those norms, and be moved by their normative force. We could attribute to a mousetrap the goal of catching mice in a particular way, coupled with some set of beliefs about how this goal is best achieved. While the physical activity of the mousetrap can be viewed as perfectly rational if we attribute an appropriate set of intentional states to it, the trap fails to qualify as a rational agent since it has no grasp of the norms that such a viewpoint presupposes, and is incapable of modifying its activity in light of their force. We might think that this is also the reason that our attributions of intentional states to the trap are not truly warranted, though this is a further claim that the Kantian need not endorse. By contrast, the performances of human agents can and typically do fall short of achieving ideal compliance with the norms of rationality. However, insofar as those agents have an implicit grasp of those norms, and are capable of letting their behaviour be shaped by that grasp, they nonetheless qualify as rational agents. Agents can thus be subject to the norms of rationality even as they fall short of the ideal that those norms specify.

What kind of grasp of such norms is required for rational agency? This is a difficult question, which Rovane struggles to settle in far more space than I have here.⁸ We can at least say, negatively, that such a grasp need not be explicit or articulable. Most rational agents have given no explicit thought to what a norm of rationality might even be, let alone tried to articulate one for themselves. Positively, such a grasp must at least be sufficient to shape the course of the agent's thought and behaviour. Rovane thus compares agents' grasp of the norms of rationality to the grasp language users might have of the grammar of a language in virtue of the kinds of innate competences proposed by Chomsky—a grasp that need not be articulable by the subject, but nonetheless informs and shapes their performances.

What are the norms that must be grasped? There are many: the requirement to resolve inconsistencies among one's intentional attitudes; the requirement to work out the implications of one's intentional attitudes and their conjunctions; the requirement to transitively rank one's preferences where possible. However, Rovane holds that all such requirements are subordinate to the overarching requirement to arrive at and act upon all-things-considered judgments in the light of all relevant intentional attitudes. Agents thus approximate the ideal of rationality to the extent to which they meet this requirement. Rovane calls this the requirement to achieve 'overall rational unity'. Implicitly grasping one's constant obligation to arrive at comprehensive all-things-considered judgments that are responsive to the evolution of one's practical situation and intentional attitudes is, for Rovane, necessary and sufficient for rational agency.

Rovane thinks that such requirements as they stand already bear on the topic of personal identity. For deciding whether there is a true conflict of rationality between a pair of contradictory intentional attitudes—whether there is a requirement to achieve overall rational unity that ranges over the contradictory attitudes—involves

⁸ An anonymous reviewer notes a particular problem arising from Rovane's occasional description of the necessary grasp of rational norms as 'reflective' (see e.g. Rovane 2004). This appears in tension with the claim that those norms are grasped in the same way as the rules of grammar on a Chomskyan model. It seems to me that the invocation of 'reflectivity' is dispensable to Rovane's view, and certainly to the Kantian view in general, so I have omitted it here. I assume, in what follows, that some appropriate precisification of the requisite grasp of rational norms is available to the Kantian.

deciding whether we view the attitudes as belonging to the same person. If you and I have contradictory desires that are nonetheless fully compatible with our own set of intentional attitudes then we are under no obligation to jointly rank or revise our desires. However, if the contradictory desires are both mine, then rationality demands that, when choosing which desire to follow, I rank or revise them appropriately rather than blindly plumping for one over the other (unless such blind plumping is what I should, all-things-considered, end up doing). For Rovane, this asymmetry does not obtain in virtue of some deeper fact about personhood, such as that in the first but not the second case the contradictory desires are associated with different conscious perspectives. The asymmetry rather reflects the brute fact that the bounds of a person are determined by where the bounds of the requirement to achieve rational unity falls. Being a person is a matter of having a unified perspective on one's situation. But, contra the neo-Lockean, it is the perspective of unified rational agency rather than of conscious experience that counts.

This line of thought is likely to look unpersuasive to the neo-Lockean, who will hold that the fact that the bounds of people coincide with the bounds of requirements to achieve rational unity is not brute, but explained by the fact that the bounds of people are fixed by the bounds of a set of mental states unified by conscious experience. For the neo-Lockean, the bounds of our conscious perspective upon the world determine the intentional states to which we enjoy a distinctive mode of first-personal access, and any such obligations to achieve rational unity as we might have range over only the states to which we have this mode of access. Here, Rovane thinks that the debate is deadlocked—there is no clear way for either the Kantian or the neo-Lockean to argue the other out of their stance on the kind of unity—rational or experiential—that is primary when assessing questions of personhood. However, Rovane thinks that there are ethical considerations that tip the balance in favour of the Kantian view. If being bound by a commitment to rational unity is constitutive of personhood then this principle follows: the possibility of *treating* something as a person suffices for it *being* a person. This is because, on Rovane's view, treating something as a person consists in acknowledging their rational point of view and interacting with them from within the space of reasons. The possibility of our successfully doing so depends on whether we are genuinely confronted with a rationally integrated set of concerns and attitudes, and whether this is so is independent of questions about loci of conscious experience. This constitutes an ethical advantage for Rovane's view since, she notes, the justifications given for many the episodes that we now recognise as the most morally abhorrent in humanity's history—those that have been offered for slavery and genocide, for example—rely on flouting the above principle, denying the status of personhood to entities whilst simultaneously understanding (at least implicitly) that they can be treated in the distinctively interpersonal ways Rovane identifies. For the Kantian, the possibility of such interpersonal engagement is necessary and sufficient for possession of whatever moral status is entailed by personhood.⁹

⁹ As two anonymous reviewers independently note, there may be responses available to non-Kantians here—perhaps there are good reasons to reject this view of the roots of the moral dignity of persons, or perhaps neo-Lockeans and animalists can show that their views are equally incompatible with the bad justifications offered for morally abhorrent acts.

So much for our sketch of Rovane's view and its motivations.¹⁰ Now we are in a position to see how Rovane's view bears on the Multiplicity Thesis.

Rational Agency and Multiple Persons

The last section began with a quote explaining how personhood can come apart from animality and consciousness on the Kantian view. The above sketch of Rovane's conception of rational agency gives us the resources to understand how this might happen in more detail. According to her view:

Although rational capacities must always be directed at achieving rational unity *somewhere*, they needn't be directed at achieving rational unity within the biological boundaries by which nature marks one human being off from another. ... They can exercise their rational capacities together so as to achieve rational unity within groups that are larger than a single human being, and they can also exercise their rational capacities in more restricted ways so as to achieve rational unity within parts that are smaller than a single human being. (Rovane 2006, p. 102)

It is perhaps easiest to see how this might go in the case of group agents. Rovane often uses the example of a couple in an extremely close relationship who each give the same weight to the plans, preferences and other intentional attitudes of their partner as they do to their own when engaged in practical reasoning. It is possible that such a couple could conform to the requirements of rationality as a pair in just the same way that most of us do as individuals, ultimately arriving at and acting upon all-things-considered judgments that respect the relations between all of their pooled intentional attitudes. We can imagine that their "commitment to deliberating together is so thoroughgoing and so effective that everything they say and do reflects their joint deliberations and never reflects their separate points of view", (Ibid, p. 102) and thus that "the human constituents of the group are not committed to having separate viewpoints of their own. That is, these human beings are not committed to achieving overall rational unity separately within their individual lives" (Ibid, pp. 102–103). Instead, the rational capacities that are operative are directed toward achieving rational unity on the part of a group agent that comprises both members of the couple.

There is a possibility that the formation of group agents (and thus, if we subscribe to Rovane's Kantian view, group persons) is an upshot of some current online practices. Expansive online multiplayer games (MMOGs) frequently involve groups of players coming together in a symbiotic relationship to pursue some end that cannot be attained individually. The activities of the members of the group are animated not just by pursuit their individual ends, but by ends which are only

¹⁰ It bears emphasising that the extremely brief sketch above does not adequately reflect the intricacies of Rovane's view, her arguments for it, or the dispute between neo-Lockean and Kantian conceptions of personhood. It does, though, suffice to set the stage for the discussion of the Multiplicity Thesis that follows. The fullest defence of Rovane's views on these matters is her (1998). See also Korsgaard (1989) on the debate between Kantian and neo-Lockean views.

attainable and intelligible with respect to the group as a whole. Plausibly, one of the attractions of playing team sports at a high level is the experience of having one's individual actions subsumed by the activity of an entity formed by the concerted activity of its members working to achieve goals (such as beating the opposing team) that they could not intelligibly possess as individuals. It will be interesting to see whether the growing literature on the social anthropology of MMOGs and their users reveals this as a factor behind the popularity of such activities. However, I won't pursue these questions further here.¹¹

Such cases of group persons allow us to introduce our main topic—the possibility of multiple persons. For just as Rovane's view allows the possibility that there might be spheres of rational unity that comprise more than one human, it also allows that one human might be comprised of more than one sphere of rational unity. Something very like this appears to be the case in sufferers of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Sufferers display distinct and apparently independently functioning alter personalities, each of which is characterised by different (but sometimes overlapping) sets of plans, projects and preferences. As Rovane notes, "because this is so, it is at least possible to engage them *as if* they were distinct persons with distinct rational points of view" (Rovane 1998, p. 169). Indeed, it is this possibility coupled with the apparent impossibility of rationally engaging the totality of the human subject's intentional attitudes simultaneously, that underlies the impression that we are dealing with a number of separate people in such cases. The treatment of those with DID usually proceeds under the assumption that only one alter personality is the 'true' person (usually the personality that is most often manifested, and that seeks out clinical help) and that the goal of the therapist is to restore the psychological life of this person to normality by somehow eliminating or integrating the alter personalities. However, within Rovane's framework, this legitimate clinical stance should not lead us to suppose that there is really only one person present in such cases. The rational point of view of the dominant personality fails to include all the intentional attitudes of the human being undergoing treatment. So the fact remains that at different times it is possible to engage in distinctively interpersonal ways with mutually independent sets of rationally integrated spheres of attitudes housed within the same human, and at no time is it possible to engage with all the intentional attitudes of the human being as if they belonged to the same person. And within Rovane's framework, as we saw above, the possibility or impossibility of successfully engaging an entity in distinctively interpersonal relations suffices to determine whether that entity qualifies as a person.

One line of resistance to Rovane's conceptualisation of DID might be the neo-Lockean thought that the alter personalities constitute distinct persons not in virtue

¹¹ One reason for not doing so is that there is a compelling line of objection to Rovane's thinking on group agents which further pursuit would need to address. Unless we hold that when engaged in appropriately concerted activity the members of groups lose their status as individual persons, it is open to object that the application of the concept of personhood to the group appears secondary to its application to the group's conscious, human members. Rovane, however, needs the status of the personhood of groups and of normal human agents to be on an equal footing. See McDowell (2006) for this objection. The other reason for not pursuing this line of thought is that doing so would distract from my primary purpose of assessing the status of MT with respect to philosophical views of personhood.

of being separate loci of rational agency, but by being separate loci of conscious experience. One difficulty for this neo-Lockean line stems from the fact that the experiences of some alters can be co-conscious. Sometimes, when one personality is controlling the body, alter personalities can have phenomenological access to the perceptions, thoughts and feelings of that personality as well as to their own (see Rovane 1998, pp. 172–173). The access can even include a sense of the controlling personality's ignorance or otherwise of the alter's presence. This is problematic for the dominant neo-Lockean view held by Parfit (1986) who argues that the unity of consciousness (and thus of personhood) consists only of co-consciousness. The neo-Lockean thus needs an account of why the alter personalities constitute distinct loci of experiences despite the fact that conscious states can apparently be shared between them.¹² The most obvious such account would appeal to the rational disunity of the alter personalities, but is out of bounds to the neo-Lockean—they cannot hold that the unity of consciousness is grounded in the unity of rational agency on pain of their view collapsing into the Kantian position. Even if the neo-Lockean can provide a suitable account of the unity of experience, this would not move them beyond the stalemate Rovane identifies in the dispute between neo-Lockean and Kantian descriptions of the cases. And, as we saw above, Rovane believes there are strong ethical considerations that tip the balance in favour of the Kantian view.

We might also respond to this conceptualisation of DID with the worry that it shows too much—does it not have the consequence that many apparently normal human beings with disparate projects or sides to their character are in fact several separate persons? Rovane's framework may indeed open up the possibility of non-pathological cases of disunity. This is why, as we will shortly see, it is of interest when assessing the prospects of the Multiplicity Thesis. However, it is important to see that my merely having apparently unrelated sets of projects and concerns does not suffice for my being more than one person. As Rovane notes, she herself has several different and unrelated projects in her life. Nevertheless, this need not compromise her rational unity, since:

(1) whenever I pursue one of them, I judge that it is best, all things considered, for me to do so then, and (2) the scope of the 'all' in such all-things-considered judgments ranges over my commitments to all of the different activities. (Ibid, p. 175)

Thus, even though my life may involve several sets of completely distinct projects, so long as I always pursue them in light of a conception (perhaps only implicitly held) of how the course of action I am taking fits into my life as a whole, this need

¹² An anonymous referee notes: perhaps there are relevant differences between the experience of unity involved in non-pathological cases and the relevant DID cases. And perhaps a neo-Lockean could appeal to these differences to ground an account of the separation of the experiences of the putatively different persons in DID cases. Unfortunately, investigating these possibilities is beyond the scope of this paper—as noted above, my aim is only to show that the neo-Kantian view can make sense of MT, not to conclusively establish or defend that view. The same referee also notes that a neo-Lockean might include plans and intentions in their list of states which must be suitably related to form the basis of a person. I am sympathetic to this suggestion, and discuss its bearing on MT briefly in section “[Neo-Lockeanism, Animalism and Multiplicity](#)”.

not compromise my rational unity as an agent. For example, my life includes both the projects of becoming a good philosopher and of becoming a good basketball player. As far as I can tell, I pursue these projects independently of each other—my philosophical outlook does not inform my basketball, nor does my basketball inform my philosophy. However, this does not make me two people, a philosopher and a basketballer. For my involvement in each project is constrained by how I see them contributing to the course of my life as a whole. If I judge that taking some opportunity to further myself as a basketballer will destroy my future prospects as a philosopher (or vice versa), or render it impossible to pursue any of the other projects that structure my life, then this would give me a reason to refrain from taking it. Now, contrast this with the case where I am both a philosopher and one half of a conjoined twin whose other half is a basketballer. Suppose I have no interest whatsoever in basketball (and so no interest in physical fitness), and my twin has no interest whatsoever in philosophy (and so none in quiet contemplation). Nonetheless, since we are each parts of the same organism, I have a reason to achieve a good level of physical fitness so as to minimise my discomfort when my twin is playing basketball and so as not to impede its performance in a way that will lead to an awkward souring of relations between us. Likewise, my twin has reason to cultivate a capacity for quiet contemplation, since it will be forced into situations where it cannot do much else, on pain of falling out with me, the philosopher. So although we have disparate plans and projects that are not rationally unified in the same way as those of a single agent, the fact that we must carry out those projects using a shared biological resource means that we must each take some account of the projects of the other, without necessarily making those projects our own.¹³ Rovane's framework allows for the possibility that separate spheres of practical interests could be related in this way within a normally-embodied human organism; the agent of one set of interests must take into account the preferences of the agent of the other, but for pragmatic reasons of diplomacy and resource sharing rather than because those interests are truly its own. This case will differ from that of the conjoined twins, since these agents will have conscious access to each other's beliefs, desires and shared occurrent states. However, as we saw in the above discussion of DID, such co-consciousness does not imply personal unity on Rovane's account. Whilst the philosopher might have phenomenological access to the basketballer's desire to practice free throws,

there would be no reason for the philosopher to regard that desire as a basis for deliberation and action – that is, there would be no reason for the philosopher to regard the desire as belonging to its rational point of view. Despite the fact that the philosopher was conscious of this desire, and despite the fact that the desire figured in the life of the human being whose resources the philosopher wished to use, the desire would not impinge on the philosopher's pursuit of its unifying project; because that project does not require the resources of the whole human life in question, the philosopher is free simply to disregard that

¹³ For an engaging cinematic explorations of this kind of case, see the films "Stuck on You" and "All of Me" (my thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to the latter).

desire – even while it, as it well might, lets the desire be acted upon. (Ibid, p. 176)

Both the philosopher and the basket baller are subject to the requirement to achieve rational unity that is, for Rovane, criterial of personhood. But the ways in which they pursue their separate projects mean that the requirement does not range over the totality of the intentional states of the human organism in which they are housed. Were we to converse with such a human, we could engage either with an agent who held basket balling to be the highest good, or with an agent who held philosophising to be the highest good. We could not engage with an agent who was committed to pursuing both basketball and philosophy, and thus to rationally forming preferences about which of those activities it was best to pursue on specific occasions, or in general. Within Rovane's framework, as we saw above, this suffices to entail that we would be dealing with two distinct people in such a case.

Rational Agency and the Multiplicity Thesis

We are now in a position to see why a Kantian position such as Rovane's might give us reason to endorse the Multiplicity Thesis (MT)—the thesis that some ways of creating and deploying distinct online personae can bring about the existence of several distinct persons where before there was only one. A common source of appeal of many forms of online gaming is the affordance of goals and projects that are different and detached from those the gamer can pursue in their ordinary life. And the discussion above brought out that two disparate spheres of interests and attitudes need not be rationally related to each other in the way that is, for the Kantian, constitutive of personhood, even though both spheres are housed within the same human organism. The possibility thus opens up that the plans and projects formed and pursued through online activity might come to diverge from those that structure the offline life of the human individual in such a way that the human organism is not moved by a requirement to aim for rational unity between them. As we saw above, such a case results in two distinct spheres of rationally integrated attitudes and thus, for the Kantian, two distinct persons.

Thus, so long as we allow the innocuous assumption that plans and projects can be formed and pursued via online activity—that online activity can be an instance of rational agency—Kantian positions such as Rovane's clearly imply the truth of MT. However, MT as we have stated it is only a thesis about the *possibility* of the creation of multiple persons through online activity. Do we have any reason to believe that this possibility has been realized? Note that the psychology of the human user would have to be rather unusual for this to be the case. We saw above that disparate sets of projects and concerns within an individual need not amount to disparate persons so long as the individual pursues those projects in light of some general conception of what it is best for them, all-things-considered, to do. It seems that this criterion will be met in most cases where an individual creates and maintains an online persona. Standardly, users can give reasons for why they indulge in their online activities: escapism; catharsis; a desire to experiment with or

express particular aspects of their personality; fostering feelings of achievement or belonging, and so forth.¹⁴ Such reasons reflect their views on how their online activities fit into the context of their lives as a whole. So long as such activities are viewed and pursued by the individual against the backdrop of such a context, we shall not have an instance of the actualization of the possibility MT identifies. Even if the individual views their online activity as a vice, or feels in some way ashamed of, or alienated from, the plans and projects pursued through it, that activity still belongs to them as a unified agent so long as they are sensitive to the force of the requirement to rationally integrate that activity with the plans and projects that structure the rest of their life. Recall (from section “[Rational Agency and Personhood](#)”) that the norms of rationality specify an ideal of which rational agents typically fall short. This means that agents can manifest sensitivity to rational requirements without being successfully moved into complying with them. So perceiving one’s online activity as conflicting with the other projects in one’s life is as much a way of manifesting rational unity as perceiving it as in harmony with those projects.

How, then, might the possibility identified by MT be realized? I think we can shed light on this question by considering a possible Kantian diagnosis of cases of addiction. Though there are many possible ways of conceptualising the relationship between addiction and responsible agency (see Yaffe 2001 for a survey), an intuitive option for the Kantian is to understand such cases as involving a schism in the structure of the addict’s will. In severe cases of addiction, addicts might form, deliberate upon and execute complex and multi-layered plans aimed at satisfying their cravings. Viewing the subject only as an addict, the intentional attitudes involved in such planning and execution might achieve the level of rational unity that suffices for personhood. However, we might also view the subject as a person struggling with their addiction, someone who wishes to disown the desires, plans and projects via which their addiction is manifested and managed. They have desires and plans to lead a clean and healthy life, and, when not gripped by their addiction, it is those attitudes that shape their activity. They do not count desires for the substance to which they are addicted, or plans concerning how to acquire it, as authentically their own. Though they might have phenomenological access to acute cravings for the substance, they do not view those cravings as authentic desires belonging to them as an agent, but as unfortunate consequences of the body they are in. It might be appropriate for a Kantian to view such a case, appropriately filled out, as involving two separate spheres of rational agency, one belonging to the addict, the other to the clean-living person unfortunately housed in a physiologically addicted body. When the addict forms and executes complex plans to feed their addiction, they may have some access to the desire to lead a healthy and stable life, yet not experience that desire as having any practical force for them. The proposed case is not one where the desire has some practical force that happens to be insufficient to guide action, but one where such a desire is simply not a factor in the addict’s practical reasoning—it doesn’t fall within the scope of the requirement to achieve rational unity that determines their boundaries as a person. By contrast the

¹⁴ See Yee (2006) for a survey of common motivations of online gamers.

clean-living subject might have some access to desires for illicit substances and plans for their acquisition, but not view those attitudes as their own—perhaps seeing them instead as unfortunate traces of the addict who used to share their body. The proposal is not that such desires are experienced as having a small amount of practical force that is insufficient to move the subject, but that the subject refuses to dignify that desire by counting it among their own authentic attitudes—they do not view it as falling within the scope of a requirement to achieve rational unity that determines their boundaries as a person.¹⁵ In such a case, the Kantian should say that we are dealing with two distinct persons. At some times we can engage with the addict and her desires and plans, and at others with the clean-living subject. But at no time can we engage with a person who simultaneously claims ownership of the projects of seeking and consuming drugs and of living a stable, healthy and drug-free life. For the Kantian, this is because those projects belong to distinct spheres of rational unity, and thus to distinct persons.

Suppose that some cases of addiction can be plausibly understood along the above lines.¹⁶ Now note that heavy users of online virtual worlds and MMOGs can manifest all the hallmarks of addiction (such as salience, mood modification, withdrawal symptoms, cravings and relapse) (Chappell et al. 2006), and the fMRI data from online gaming addicts matches that of substance addicts (Ko et al. (2009)).¹⁷ If the above Kantian conceptualisation of addiction as potentially involving two persons pursuing competing projects with a single body is cogent, then it might equally apply to some patterns of online activity. Consider the case of Tom, reported in Chappell et al. (2006), who became addicted to the MMOG ‘Everquest’ to the extent that he stopped going to work and played for an average of 20 h a day. Tom reports:

At the end of September police came to my door because my company had filed a missing persons report on me. I told them I wasn’t missing and sent them on their way with my office keys, the company’s laptop, credit cards etc. and I didn’t blink an eye. (Quoted in Chappell et al. 2006, p. 210)

Tom had become so enveloped in the world of the game that the plans and projects that formerly characterised his offline life ceased to have practical import for him. However, he also reports that:

I have cried many times over the last two years and wished I was dead, because I knew what I was doing to myself and couldn’t stop or even slow down. (Ibid.)

¹⁵ We can perhaps find a precedent for the unusual kind of access that one agent in such a case has to the desires of the other in the way some schizophrenic patients experience inserted thoughts or actions. See Frith (1992) for a lucid and influential account and theory of the phenomena, and Campbell (1999) for a discussion of their significance for philosophical conceptions of thought. Given the present context, it is interesting to note such anomalous patterns of access are frequently argued to result from disorders of agency.

¹⁶ Making this case fully is beyond the scope of this paper. For some relevant discussion, see Frankfurt (1971), Mele (1990) and Yaffe (2001).

¹⁷ See the reports listed in Chappell et al. (2006). Sublette and Mullan (2010) is a useful meta survey of studies on the consequences of online gaming.

This contrasts with the blithe attitude exhibited in his dealing with the police and losing his job, and suggests that Tom, the human individual, was still a locus of plans and projects that involved leading a normal and balanced life. Simultaneously, his accounts suggest that he was immune to the practical force of any such projects whilst immersed in the world of the game. If it is legitimate to take a Kantian view of the addicted individual as comprising two separate spheres of rational agency, and thus two separate persons, then it should be legitimate to take such a view of a gamer such as Tom.¹⁸

The analogy and example I have used to make the case for the actuality of the possibility identified by MT suggests that the cases where online activity brings about multiple persons should be avoided. Is this necessarily the case? One reason to think so is the plausible intuition that it is, in some way, unhealthy for one human body to house more than one individual. However, this intuition can be questioned—is living a unified human life really an intrinsic good? Rovane suggests that it is not:

[W]e now typically pursue the project of living a unified human life for the sake of other more specific projects such as lifelong personal relationships (friendships, marriages, families) and, also, careers. But what I want to emphasize is that these are *projects* and they are *optional*. [...] When a human being's projects are numerous, and when they have nothing to do with one another, this may make it pointless to strive to achieve overall rational unity within that human life. And it may be a rational response to let go of the commitment to achieving such overall rational unity within that human life and to strive instead for as many pockets of rational unity as are required for the pursuit of those relatively independent projects. (Rovane 2006, pp. 104–105)

For the Kantian, then, it is at least possible that the disunity of separate spheres of rational unity within a single human can be benign. All that is required is that the projects specified within each sphere are not undermined by the pursuit of those in the other. Consider the relationship of the two protagonists who share a body in Chuck Palahniuk's "Fight Club". At least initially, the narrator's pedestrian life is enriched by his being dragged into the pursuit of Tyler Duerden's goals, even while the narrator does not fully embrace those goals as his own. We might also suppose that the constraints imposed on Tyler Duerden's activity by sharing a body with the narrator constitute a good influence on him. If the plans and projects of the separate spheres are appropriately related, then their being pursued through the same body might enrich the agent of each, rather than being a source of trouble. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the equilibrium between such distinct sets of projects must always

¹⁸ As Williams (1970) shows, our views about the identification of persons in specific cases can be dramatically affected by the description we give of the cases. So it's possible that my description of the above cases involves an implicit bias in favour of the Kantian view, or MT, or both. However, note again that my goal here is not to demonstrate the truth or falsity of the Kantian view, or of MT. I aim only to show that the Kantian view is a candidate conception of personhood that can make good sense of MT. Demonstrating that we should accept or reject that view or its conceptualisations is a much more difficult task, which I do not attempt here. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this point.

be a delicate one. So long as the agent of each set is in competition with the other for the limited resources of a single human body, each agent will have to recognise that they have instrumental reasons to go along with the projects of the other for large amounts of time, in order to avoid disharmony that will impair their quality of life. Each member of a pair of such agents must spend around half of their lives being passive parties to a set of projects with which they completely fail to identify, on pain of integrating into a single agent. It seems likely that exceptional (though surely not impossible) circumstances would be required for this to be done in a way that is both benign to, and sustainable for, each agent.

We have seen, then, that a Kantian view of persons provides a natural home for MT. We have also seen that for the possibility identified by MT to be realised the psychology of the human individual involved will have to be disjointed in a specific, and probably unusual way. Whilst it is plausible that there are some existing cases where a Kantian might wish to say this has occurred, the most plausible instances of such cases appear to be ones of addiction or pathological use, and so appear to be cases to be avoided. It might be possible, upon the Kantian view, for online activity to result in the existence of multiple persons in a way that is benign to the agents involved. However, it seems likely that this would only be the case in exceptional circumstances.

Neo-Lockeanism, Animalism and Multiplicity

Before concluding, I will take a very brief look at the prospects of the other main conceptions of personhood, sketched in section “[Three Approaches to Personhood](#)”, for accommodating MT. First, neo-Lockeanism, which holds that the unity of personhood consists in the unity of a locus of conscious experience. What such a neo-Lockean view will make of MT depends on the account it gives of the unity of experience. As we noted above, the most influential neo-Lockean account (Parfit (1986)) simply equates unity with co-consciousness. This view appears to rule out MT. Just as such a view would count a human suffering from DID as a single person with an unusual array of competing and contradictory co-conscious states, it would also count a human who was engaged in the pursuit of several rationally insulated spheres of projects through various online and offline fora as embodying a single person with an unusual conscious life. Alternative accounts of the unity of consciousness are available, however. A neo-Lockean view might be rendered more hospitable to MT depending on the way in which it individuates spheres of unified consciousness. As we also noted above, a natural way of doing this would be to appeal to the kinds of Kantian considerations we have been exploring above—a series of conscious states counts as unified to the extent that it is co-occurrent with a single stream of rational agency.¹⁹ Such a hybrid version of the neo-Lockean and Kantian positions would allow the possibility of MT for the reasons we have been exploring above.

¹⁹ See the first part of Hurley’s (1998) for exploration of such a view.

The most common version of animalism, which equates personhood with living the life of a particular kind of biological organism, appears to straightforwardly rule out MT. In creating new online personae for ourselves we are not creating new biological organisms, and so not creating new persons. A different variety of animalism (endorsed by Wollheim (1986), McDowell (1997, 2006)), according to which the unity of a person is the unity of a particular kind of life (a kind of life made possible by the kind of biological organisms we are) affords better prospects for MT. How such a position views MT will depend on the account it gives of what it is to lead a single, unified life. This might be a neo-Lockean account, appealing to an animal's having a single stream of conscious experience; a Kantian account, appealing to an animal's comprising a single locus of rational agency; or an account appealing to some criteria not specified by these views. Though McDowell's writing on this topic is sparse, his work in the philosophy of mind and agency (see e.g. McDowell 1994, 1998) suggests that he would endorse neither the neo-Lockean nor Kantian views in isolation. For McDowell, capacities to enjoy world-disclosing experience must be understood in terms of capacities for rational agency, and capacities for agency must in turn be understood in terms of the capacity to grasp the opportunities afforded by the world through perception. In this paper I have focused on the prospects of MT according to the Kantian view. An alternative and perhaps promising line of inquiry would be to investigate how such a McDowellian hybrid of neo-Lockean and Kantian views might be developed and applied to the possibility identified by MT. It seems that such a hybrid view might avoid some of the problems faced by its constituents. We saw above that neo-Lockean accounts need a theory of the unity of consciousness that appeals to more than mere co-consciousness, but that their neo-Lockean credentials rule out the attractive possibility of appealing to Kantian considerations here. The Kantian view, whatever its merits, is surely made less palatable by a residual intuition that conscious experience is in some way essentially implicated in personhood—the intuition that, whatever the rational structure manifested by the activity of some entity, that entity will only qualify as a person in some impoverished or derivative sense if it is not a seat of conscious experience. A hybrid view that appeals to consciousness and agency in an account of what it is to lead a unified life would avoid both these problems. Would such a view allow us to endorse MT? Of course, this depends on how the details of the view are filled in. If such a view amounted to, in broad outline, the claim that the continuation or unity of a person consisted in the continuity or unity of a life comprising interrelated streams of consciousness and agency, then it might be that MT can be accommodated by the animalist in much the same way as by the Kantian. The creation of different spheres of rational unity via the creation of rationally insulated spheres of plans and projects in different online and offline fora would result in the creation of different and separate loci of conscious experience, since the unity of consciousness is to be defined in terms of agency. Such a view on MT is perhaps an intuitive one. A major contribution of the mass availability of the internet is the opening up of new, diverse and divergent potential trajectories for human lives. If we think that the internet has also opened up new possibilities for the way persons' lives can diverge from the lives of organisms, it appears plausible that the latter development might be explained in

terms of the former. A proper investigation of such a strategy, however, must be postponed for another occasion.

Conclusion

I have argued that a particular Kantian line of thought on personhood is best placed to make sense of the thesis that some forms of online activity can create multiple persons where before there was only one. However, I also argued that a specific and unusual psychological structure would be required to realise the possibility identified by that thesis. So whilst the Kantian view suggests that MT may be actualised, it also suggests that this would be so only rarely, and that such cases are likely to represent undesirable possibilities for human lives. I also briefly suggested, above, that a particular form of animalism might be hospitable to MT, for the broadly Kantian reasons canvassed in the rest of the paper. The most natural option for those concerned to argue that our online activity is reconfiguring the nature of our personal identity in the way suggested by MT, then, appears to be to set out and defend some specific Kantian view on the nature of persons. There might also be implications running in the opposite direction—from intuitions or data about the role of online activity in shaping personhood to particular views of personal identity. If it became apparent that certain modes of online activity reliably create a psychological structure like that which characterises DID then this might constitute a pressure to adopt a view on personal identity that allows for the possibility that a single conscious human organism can be involved in the life of more than one person. Conversely, if online activity furnishes us with a lot of examples of human individuals with multiple spheres of rationally insulated projects and concerns, but we feel no compulsion to say we are presented with multiple persons when confronted with such humans, then this would constitute a line of evidence against the Kantian view. As the prevalence, diversity and sophistication both of modes of online activity and of research into its character and effects increases, it will be interesting to observe whether and how such possibilities play out.

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