

The Phenomenal Self, by Barry Dainton, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. xxvi + 434. H/b £67.50, P/b £25.00.

Barry Dainton's *The Phenomenal Self* is a detailed attempt to give a neo-Lockean account of the nature, unity, and persistence of subjects. Though many of the issues covered are familiar from the literature on personal identity and the self, Dainton's concerns are broader and also include minded beings which probably do not qualify as persons or selves in the ordinary sense of these terms. Unlike most contemporary neo-Lockeans, Dainton believes that the synchronic and diachronic relations that unify subjects are experiential or phenomenal, rather than psychological: to put it roughly, beings like us persist in virtue of sustaining the capacity to undergo conscious experience. The first half (Chs 1–5) of Dainton's book is an extended defence of this position, which he calls the C-theory; the second half (Chs 6–12) further refines the theory and draws some wider implications. The twelve chapters are followed by an appendix on reductionism about personal identity.

In chapter one Dainton briefly dismisses the main rival of the neo-Lockean approach, animalism—the view that persons (or at least the persons we know of) are biological organisms and accordingly have biological persistence conditions. He devotes considerably more space to arguing that in several conceivable situations the psychological variety of neo-Lockeanism delivers intuitively wrong results and is therefore inferior to the experience-based version. Chapters two and three deal, respectively, with the synchronic and diachronic unity of the self. According to Dainton the essential relation that unifies experiences into a single stream of consciousness is the primitive, unanalyzable co-consciousness relation, in terms of which we can give a non-circular analysis of the unity of consciousness and the persistence of the self. Chapter

four tackles a problem familiar to anyone who accepts an experience-based theory of our identity at and over time: how can the view account for apparently survivable periods of unconsciousness? Dainton's answer is that subjects stay in existence so long as they retain their *capacity* to undergo conscious experience, so our identity conditions are to be given in terms of experiential *powers* rather than manifest experiences. Chapter five discusses various alternative versions of the experience-based approach and argues that the C-theory is superior to all of them.

The main goal of chapter six is to make clear the differences between the experience-based approach and the more standard psychological theory, with a keen eye on what matters in personal survival. Chapter seven is concerned with the relationship between subjects and their bodies and distinguishes four stages of embodiment. Chapter eight discusses how simple a subject can be with respect to its phenomenology and underlying experiential powers. It argues that there could be phenomenally extremely simple selves and also selves which are pure streams of consciousness without a power base. Chapter nine is a defence of holism about the phenomenal realm: it argues that experiential capacities are heavily interdependent, largely in the way psychological capacities are according to many advocates of the psychological view. Some distinctively phenomenal considerations that figure in the discussion also lead Dainton to the surprising conclusion that selves are in an important sense metaphysically simple. Chapter ten explores the issue of whether subjects can gradually fade out of existence or their existence is rather an all-or-nothing matter, and tentatively takes a stance in favour of the latter view. Chapter eleven considers objections to the C-theory: among others, that the identity conditions of subjects cannot be analyzed in terms of mental states because the latter ontologically depend on the former, and that the view implies a wrong account of what we are. Chapter twelve discusses the fission problem: what happens if a person splits in two; which offshoot, if any, is identical to the

pre-fission subject? By introducing a distinction between personal and external time, Dainton offers a novel and quite radical solution according to which the offshoots are identical to both the pre-fission person and each other.

Dainton's treatment of personal identity is fairly unorthodox not only in substance but also in its methodology. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, more and more philosophers began to adopt an 'ontology first' approach: a plausible account of personal identity has to be based on a plausible account of what kinds of things persons are, and a plausible ontology of persons is best achieved by first answering general ontological questions. (I count as an early representative of this approach Peter van Inwagen's *Material Beings* (Cornell UP, 1990); more recent works include Eric Olson's, *The Human Animal* (OUP, 1997) and *What Are We?* (OUP, 2007), L. R. Baker's, *Persons and Bodies* (CUP, 2000), and Hud Hudson's, *A Materialist Metaphysics of the Human Person* (Cornell UP, 2001).) Dainton's approach is strikingly different and is closer to what we can find in most of the earlier discussions of personal identity, especially the classic writings of Derek Parfit and Sydney Shoemaker: he first consults intuitions about various imaginary cases and only then draws general conclusions about the identity and ontology of persons, trying to stay as neutral as possible about most general issues. While (rightly in my view) thought experiments are still being taken seriously and are critically assessed in contemporary discussions of personal identity, the approach that is *primarily* based on imaginary cases has come in for a good deal of criticism in recent years. Dainton acknowledges this but maintains that thought experiments have a 'legitimate but limited' role in philosophy. While everyone who is not hostile to thought experiments *per se* could agree with this much, the fact that imaginary scenarios often play a crucial and in certain cases exclusive role in the argument might make some readers get off the boat at the beginning. (For instance, the case for the

intransitivity of synchronic co-consciousness relations and the rejection of biological accounts of personal identity are entirely based on thought experiments.)

In the preface Dainton mentions two topics on which he wishes to stay neutral: the exact relation between the physical and the phenomenal (excluding substance dualism, which he thinks is probably false), and the nature of persistence. However, metaphysical neutrality as a theoretical virtue is appealed to throughout the book: Dainton also wants his account of experiential powers to be neutral on the general nature of dispositions, and he favours what he calls the minimalist version of the C-theory over the maximalist one because the former is ‘viable in a wider range of metaphysical frameworks’, and all things being equal it is preferable to ‘remain as neutral as possible on general metaphysical issues’ (p. 215).

I have some doubts as to whether Dainton succeeds in this ambition. A case in point is the discussion of fission, where he offers a new account that does not decide between the endurance and the perdurance theory of persistence. (According to the latter, objects persist in virtue of having numerically distinct temporal parts at different times, while according to the former they stay numerically identical and are wholly present at each time of their existence.) Drawing an analogy with David Lewis’s treatment of time travel, Dainton distinguishes between external time and personal time and argues that while from the perspective of external time fission seems puzzling, there is at least one temporal framework for each fission offshoot in which that offshoot’s career is unproblematic. Then he adopts what he calls the Temporal Parity Principle: having an unproblematic career in one such framework is sufficient for having an unproblematic career *period*. I have two remarks on this solution. First, relying on the possibility of branching personal time and the Temporal Parity Principle is itself a controversial move. Dainton is aware of this and responds to a number of objections. These responses may well be convincing, but the

question still remains: if the price of staying neutral with respect to the endurance/perdurance controversy is a commitment to such a heavy metaphysical baggage, one may wonder how much overall neutrality is achieved at the end of the day. After all, in the same vein one could argue that one theoretical virtue of the perdurantist solution to fission cases is that it does not presuppose the Temporal Parity Principle. Why is it so important to stay neutral on one particular debate if the price is a commitment to something similarly controversial? Second, it is not entirely clear to me why neutrality is even desirable in such matters. One might fear that if a theory of subjects is neutral with respect to too many general metaphysical issues it will be seriously lacking in content, which would make it difficult to see what makes the view *metaphysical* in the first place. The more blank spaces there are in an account of subjects, the less obvious it will be that it is still an account of what we are.

This being said, many of Dainton's insights are suggestive and illuminating. He is also very honest in often drawing only tentative conclusions, admitting that the arguments proposed in their favour are not decisive. Still, some readers may feel that he plays down the traditional alternatives to the experience-based approach rather quickly. For example, only a few pages of chapter one are devoted to animalism, against which Dainton's single direct argument rests on a thought experiment: he asks us to imagine undergoing a cell replacement procedure during which our brain cells are entirely replaced by inorganic material capable of harbouring conscious experience. It seems clear, he claims, that one can undergo this procedure without losing consciousness and going out of existence. But the possibility of our becoming inorganic things appears hard to reconcile with our being animals. However, animalists have well-known responses to scenarios like this, of which Dainton is otherwise well aware (Ch. 6.7). They typically say that numerical identity and prudential concern can come apart: in some cases it can

be rational to care more about the future of my psychological (or for that matter, experiential) continuer than the mindless entity I will become.

Dainton's response to what he considers the best argument *for* animalism is more convincing, and this is certainly a virtue of his account. Briefly, the argument (often referred to as the Problem of the Thinking Animal) is that human animals appear to be conscious beings, and unless we are identical to them it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that we are sharing our place with other conscious beings. Dainton's reply is twofold and consists of novel and a familiar element. The novel one is what he calls the minimalist view: subjects are C-systems, that is, collections of experiential powers capable of producing co-conscious experiences. The familiar element is the distinction between primary and derivative property possession: certain things possess a property merely in virtue of some of their proper parts having the property in question. Putting the two together, Dainton's suggestion is that animals are conscious merely in the derivative sense: they have phenomenal states because they are appropriately related to C-systems that have such states. The emerging view is that though human animals are conscious, their experiential powers are numerically identical to the experiential powers of genuine subjects, and so the problem evaporates. This response can be seen as a variation on the idea that persons are merely proper parts of human animals, but it importantly differs in at least one respect. If persons are simply proper parts of human animals we still have a merely contingently conscious smallish object (let us say a brain for the sake of simplicity) co-located with a person that is necessarily conscious, and this is little improvement over the original problem (cf. David B. Hershenov, 'Persons as Proper Parts of Organisms', *Theoria*, 71, pp. 29–37). On the other hand, it is at least not obvious that collections of experiential capacities have any overlapping rivals in

the same problematic way in which brain-sized persons do on the simpler view. If they do not, Dainton's account evades a significant objection that other rivals of animalism cannot.

The Phenomenal Self is a highly ambitious piece of philosophical work that covers a lot of ground and also has some intuitive appeal. It is written in a clear, straightforward and engaging style, though the prose could have been made a bit more reader-friendly: the four hundred pages are chock-full of hard-to-memorize abbreviations of theses that often differ only in nuances (this problem is somewhat alleviated in the paperback edition, which contains a glossary of the technical terms). The book is to be commended for taking a creative and original approach to an important topic, but I am not convinced that it fulfills its agenda. Because of its extensive and sometimes exclusive reliance on thought experiments, some might see *The Phenomenal Self* as based on shaky foundations. And while the book is packed with interesting ideas, the cases Dainton makes for them are sometimes less than fully compelling. (Thanks to Karen Bennett, Kati Ersek and Orsi Reich for comments and discussion.)

Cornell University david mark kovacs
Sage School of Philosophy
218 Goldwin Smith Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853
USA