

Review of David DeGrazia's *Human Identity and Bioethics*

David DeGrazia has penned an ambitious book that brings recent work in the metaphysics of personal identity as well as the “non-metaphysical” notion of narrative identity to bear on contemporary bioethics issues. While I am sympathetic to the metaphysical account of animal identity that DeGrazia borrows from Eric Olson, he doesn't seem to realize a major weakness, which Olson himself admitted. This has to do with the possibility of thinking entities embedded within the organism. He also seems unaware, or, at least, indifferent to rival religious-inspired soul theories of our identity that avoid this problem - as well as have other merits. His summary dismissal of such soul theories and his defense of abortion and embryonic stem cell research will not endear him to most readers of *NCBQ*. Despite these qualms, the book is worth reading. The chapter on advance directives may become the starting point for future discussions.

DeGrazia follows Olson in arguing that those accounts of personal identity which stress there must be some psychological traits rendering a later individual at T_2 identical to an earlier one at T_1 , all suffer from an inability to account for the relationship between the person and the organism. Puzzles arise if a person is not identical to the organism but merely co-located or embedded within it. The worse of these is that there would then be two *thinking* beings in the same place since the organism and person share a functioning brain. If the person can use the brain to think, then it would seem that the organism could as well.

DeGrazia thinks the most promising of the psychological accounts of our identity is Jeff McMahan's embodied mind account.¹ McMahan suggests that the reader is really just a very small part of the human organism, composed of that part of the brain responsible for directly producing thought. We come into existence when minimal sentience, not self-consciousness, first becomes possible, perhaps five months after fertilization, and we go out of existence when the capacity for mere thought and feeling is lost. The organism of which we are a part thinks our thoughts in a harmless, derivative way analogous to the manner in which a car is derivatively noisy because its horn is non-derivatively noisy. DeGrazia rejects McMahan's view for being unable to ultimately deal with the relation between the person and the brain. Ironically, DeGrazia describes the mind's relationship to the brain in a way that suggests something like McMahan's view of our identity is correct. DeGrazia repeatedly describes the mind as the brain or as the brain functioning in a certain way, and even describes the brain as the organ of thought (50-52,

¹ McMahan, Jeff. *The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life*. (Oxford University Press, 2002).

66). This makes it sound as if mental states are brain states and thus suggests that the brain is the subject of thought. What DeGrazia needs is the organism to be the subject of thought, and not derivatively a thinker in virtue of having a thinking part, the brain. If the brain is the organ of thought, then it seems as if the brain is what strictly thinks our thoughts. DeGrazia could still resist the McMahan conclusion about our identity, but only by claiming that we don't strictly think our own thoughts. But as Olson, Chisholm and many others have argued, if any thing strictly, nonderivatively, thinks our thoughts, we surely are that entity rather than another entity that only thinks in virtue of something doing the proper thinking for it.²

Olson, the major influence on DeGrazia's metaphysics, is keenly aware of the problem of the thinking brain. He claims it is the major objection to his view, though one shared by all his materialist rivals. To avoid it, he denies that there are such things as brains, heads, or any other bodily part that includes them.³ Olson realizes that if such things existed they should be able to think since they share the parts of the brain deemed crucial to the production of thought. It is this problem of too many thinking objects that has made Unger recently abandon his materialism and embrace dualism, and it is the central argument of Zimmerman's defense of the soul.⁴ These prominent metaphysicians believe the problem isn't so much that material things are the wrong type of things to think, but that there are too many equally good *material* candidates for thinking. And they maintain it would be absurd if there were many thinking beings in the reader's chair.

DeGrazia is not at all sympathetic to intellectual traditions that posit immaterial thinking beings. He briefly sketches why he finds soul views to be so implausible (47-48). He first offers the traditional criticism that soul/body interaction is impossible. This is actually an argument for atheism since God would have to be an immaterial being causally interacting with the material world. Perhaps DeGrazia would accept such a quick victory over theism, but if he or others would not, then interactionism may not be such an obvious death blow to soul theories. DeGrazia puts even more weight in his materialist argument against the soul on the alleged neurological dependence of thought. He thinks the split brain phenomenon where patients have two distinct

² Chisholm, Eric. "Is There a Mind-Body Problem?" *Philosophical Exchange* 2: 1979. 25-34. Olson, Eric. *What Are We?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³ Olson, Eric. "Why I Have No Hands," *Theoria*, 61, 1995. 182-197. "Thinking Animals and the Reference of 'I'" *Philosophical Topics*. 30:1, 2002. 189-207. Olson doesn't deny that there are subatomic particles located where commonsense finds a brain, only that those particles compose a larger brain-shaped object.

⁴ Zimmerman, Dean. "Material People," *The Oxford Handbook of Metaphysics*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 492-526. Unger, Peter. "Free Will and Scientificalism" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 65:1, 2002. 1-25.

centers of consciousness is quite damning. But the dualist need not be committed to the mind being independent from the brain, only that mental states are states of the soul. To borrow Plantinga's analogy, walking and digesting are states dependent upon the brain but surely are not brain states.⁵ So if thought is dependent upon the brain, that need not make thought a brain state rather than a state of the soul. Once a dependence is allowed, even the split brain case is less problematic. And even if dualism has the problems that DeGrazia suggests, the hylomorphism traditionally embraced by Catholicism has a much greater immunity to them. Aquinas was well aware of the dependence of thought on phantasms produced by the brain which could admit of disruption due to physical causes. The hylomorphic soul is not the Cartesian soul which is identical to the person and the entity doing the thinking. Rather, the hylomorphic soul configures the matter of the person and enables the human being to think. The result is a thinking person that is not identified with its matter or its soul. So a split brain doesn't involve an immaterial hylomorphic soul splitting but merely a thinking self-conscious person cut off from some of his thoughts.

After the chapter on metaphysical identity, DeGrazia discusses narrative identity and then brings the two senses of identity to bear on advance directives. Narrative identity is not the same as metaphysical (aka personal or numerical) identity. Narrative identity is not concerned with reidentifying someone across time, but what traits authentically characterize someone as opposed to being imposed say by parents or society. When the amnesiac asks "Who am I?" his question is one of metaphysical or numerical identity; when an adolescent or adult in a mid-life crisis ask the same question, the concern is with narrative identity. After clarifying the two types of identity in a splendid discussion, DeGrazia brings them to bear on advanced directives. If we are essentially persons, then when we lose the capacity for self-consciousness we would cease to exist. But there might be demented beings where we were. DeGrazia asks if we persons are not identical to these merely sentient creatures, why should any advance directives that we pen be binding on such post-persons? He labels this "The Someone Else Problem." DeGrazia claims that since we are essentially animals who survive the loss of self-consciousness there won't be a someone else problem. DeGrazia then ponders why the organism's earlier decision binds its later self if it is perhaps content in its demented, childlike state and not asking for treatment to cease. He claims

⁵ Plantinga, Alvin. "Materialism and Christian Belief" in *Persons: Human and Divine*. Ed. Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman (Oxford University Press, 2007) 134-35.

it can't be because the earlier interests outweigh the later. He thinks appeals to interests result in a draw. Rather, he puts more weight on the precedent authority of the earlier autonomous decision. Medical ethicists often consider patient autonomy to trump patient interests. However, he makes an exception for those cases in which the earlier person didn't identify closely with the prospect of being in a demented state. That is, the person's narrative identity extends only weakly, if at all, to the later state. If the healthy person didn't earlier identify with and imagine himself as the later, minimally sentient individual, then there would be greater reason to give more weight at the later time to the interests of the demented person.

It is the positions DeGrazia takes on embryonic stem cell research (ESCR) and abortion in his final chapter that will most disturb traditional Catholic bioethicists. He believes ESCR is morally more akin to contraception than abortion in that it prevents a human being from coming into existence rather than kills an existing one. He believes we don't come into existence until twinning is no longer possible, so we never were zygotes or one week old embryos. This position will likely be familiar and rather unconvincing to regular readers of *NCBQ*. They will find more plausible one of the following views: that the original human that was once a zygote died upon twinning; the original human being survives twinning as the older of two twins, the other is newly ensouled; or there were two human beings present from fertilization for God foresaw the twinning and placed two souls in the womb at conception.

DeGrazia believes religious views are not reasonable enough for a public policy debate about abortion to take them into consideration on their own terms (280). So he instead targets Don Marquis's pro-life argument that abortion is wrong because it robs a fetus of a valuable future even though the fetus can't conceptualize what it will miss out on. DeGrazia draws upon Jeff McMahan's Time Relative Interests Account (TRIA) to offer an alternative explanation of the badness of death.⁶ McMahan and DeGrazia believe that if the harm of death were due to just the extent and value of the future that one would miss out on, then the death of the embryo would typically be worse for it than the death of the newborn is for the latter, while the newborn would be more harmed by death than an older child. But they claim that our intuitions are the reverse. They argue that the death of the embryo isn't as bad as the death of the older child because the latter has a more developed psychology frustrated by death. There is much more psychological unity (desires, intentions, memories etc.) between the older child at the time of his death and the

⁶ Marquis, Don. "Why Abortion is Immoral." *Journal of Philosophy* 86, 1989, 183-203.

future he otherwise would have experienced than there is between the embryo and the future it would be deprived of by its prenatal demise. DeGrazia and McMahan claim that the degree of death's harm depends upon the extent of psychological ties between the present and the future that are interrupted by death. Since the pre-sentient fetus is without psychological ties to the future, its death is not a deprivation, hence early abortion is not morally problematic.

I would suggest a different interpretation of why earlier deaths may seem to be less of a tragedy and loss. My account is not based upon the harm to the youngest being less. Instead of appealing to time relative interests, the explanation might in part be that the death of the older child seems a greater tragedy because the parents have put more efforts into nurturing that child which the death renders vain. And the appearance of a greater loss might just be because the parents have known the older child longer and are more attached to it. Todd Bindig claims the latter is akin to why the deaths of strangers are not as bad for us as the deaths of friends. It has nothing to do with the lives of strangers being of less value or what they lose out on due to death being less than what death takes from our friends.⁷

What makes me especially suspicious of the TRIA is that if I imagine either great pain or dying after suffering irreversible amnesia or a debilitating stroke that leaves me child-like but capable of relearning, such a loss of psychological ties does not make my pain or death seem less bad than if I suffered or died without such injuries first occurring. But since I am not very strongly connected in terms of memories, intentions, character traits, to the post-injury self, the TRIA would predict a loss of concern. But that drop is absent when I envision such a case despite the extensive loss of psychological continuity. My reaction to dying after amnesia or stroke is quite different to the prospect of my dying sometime after entering into an irreversible coma. In the latter, death doesn't seem to be a new harm - or much more of one. Thus it seems that it is the notion of being deprived of a valuable future, rather than the degree of psychological ties that is doing all the work in the two cases in accounting for the harm of death. And this view, quite congenial to the Catholic, can be defended without any appeal to a religious ethics or metaphysics that DeGrazia says must be excluded from the formulation of public policy.

⁷ Bindig, Todd. *Identity, Potential and Design: How they Impact on the Abortion Debate over the Morality of Abortion*. (VDM Verlag, 2008).