

CHAPTER V

Ethical Identities¹

My subject here is what I will be calling “ethical identity,” the identity of a specific ethical agent, with respect to the confusing matter of shared personal identity.

Perhaps we may usefully begin with a brief and concrete description. This description will allow me to introduce several conceptual reminders about personal identity generally, about self-reference and first-person ascriptions, and about multiple identities. The description may also help us criticize constructively several of these views.

These descriptions, reminders, and criticisms will then bring me to puzzles about relative identities as composite identities. In that special context I will conclude, in more of a speculative than an argumentative vein, by trying to articulate two general questions ethical agency and occasional shared identities.²

§1. Pilgrim Widows

Here then is a rather perplexing instance of our otherwise everyday, commonplace convictions that persons may share more than one identity. Consider the traditional practice in parts of India even today of what is widely called “*suttee*.”

Dictionaries tell us that the word, “*suttee*,” is a Hindi variant of the Sanskrit word, “*sati*,” (from the Sanskrit word, “*sat*,” or “good”). The word means “faithful wife.” The word usually designates, dictionaries say, “the former Hindu practice of a widow

¹ This paper is a revised version of a paper presented in much abbreviated form at a meeting of the *Institut International de Philosophie* in Zadar, Croatia, in late August and early September 2007.

² I confine my discussion here to work mostly in contemporary Anglo-American contexts.

throwing herself onto her husband's funeral pyre."³ But the word may also designate, dictionaries also say, "the widow who committed such an act," that is, the "faithful wife" herself.

These dictionary descriptions, however, are unsatisfactory in two respects. First, the description is incorrect. The practice, in fact, is not a "former practice." For, although now illegal, this practice still continues in some parts of India today.

And, second, the description is inappropriate. For talk here of "commit[ing] such an act" as in the expression, "committing a sin," suggests that acting this way is always religiously and morally reprehensible in the way that committing a sin is often both religiously and morally reprehensible. But such a suggestion is inappropriate because these connotations fit neither the ancient history nor the actual cultural contexts of this practice.

We should note that *suttee* is not a minor matter. For such a practice, and the unfamiliar beliefs that motivate it, concern an extraordinary number of persons.

About 45 million widows live in India today, almost a third more of the men, women, and children living in Canada. As *The Economist's* correspondent reported on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Partition, "Unwanted baggage in a patriarchal society, widows were once encouraged to fling themselves onto their husband's funeral pyres." (They still are, we must interject.) "The majority who did not," the correspondent continued, "were forbidden to remarry, and often corralled into beggar colonies at pilgrimage places like Vrindavan [in the state of Uttar Pradesh]. Though the law now gives India's 45 m-or-so widows better protection [from pressures to immolate themselves], they are still discouraged from remarrying."⁴

Some Indian states like Uttar Pradesh offer widows a state pension of ca. \$3.70 a month. Moreover, some widows also be-

³ See the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2002) under "suttee" and "sati."

⁴ *The Economist*, August 18, 2007.

come so-called “pilgrim widows.” That is, some widows make their ways to certain pilgrimage sites like the holy city of Vrindavan and become members of private ashrams or government hostels.

In exchange for chanting six hours a day, pilgrim widows receive daily “a handful of cooked lentils and rice” and monthly the rough equivalent of \$4.50. As pilgrim widows, however, these women must continue to wear their white saris, keep their heads entirely shaved to denote their shameful public status, and cope with the still widespread withering disdain for widows.

They suffer much, both in grieving their deceased spouses and in trying to bear with public opprobrium. Moreover, in their dealings with such suffering many of these Hindu widows seem to exhibit unusual virtues.⁵

Why do so many Indian widows suffer so much opprobrium? I simply don't know. I suspect, however, that suffering in these ways is closely linked with these widows having survived their spouses.

But what could be reprehensible about these wives surviving their husbands? Again, I don't know. But I suspect that some devout Hindus consider such surviving widows as reprehensibly depriving their spouses, and themselves, of their complete identities as persons.

How so? Many judge these women to be acquiescing in their spouse's incompleteness and in their own. Surviving widows are believed to do so by refusing *suttee* and thereby continuing to live, instead of rejoining their spouses in a long wait together as a whole for re-incarnation.

That is, by refusing *suttee* these women seem to have deliberately chosen to remain but partly persons. Moreover, they have wilfully abandoned their deceased spouses to remain but partly persons as well. They deserve disdain. They should be

⁵ Cf. L. Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: OUP, 2005). See the two reviews by M. La Caze and N. E. Snow in *Mind* 116 (2007), 781-785 and 785-789.

driven out of their homes to hostels and ashrams to live on piteous. And, just to be allowed to survive as partly persons only, they should be forced by hunger to do penance for their remaining days by chanting *bhajan*, “Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare.”

§2. Partitions

Most philosophers in Europe today find such matters unsettling – the cultural contexts are unfamiliar, the subject of *suttee* obscure, and the very idea of a partial personal identity puzzling. It all seems irrational. What is especially perplexing is the notion that not just India and then Pakistan but – if one may say so with genuine respect – even many devout Hindu women themselves have suffered partition.

Reviewing the Indian feminist’s, Deepa Mehta’s, film, “Water,” may dissipate some of these perplexities. Her film is about *suttee*.⁶ “Water,” a critic wrote, “combines a humanist message, political courage and visual poetry in a way not seen since the death of Satyajit Ray.”⁷ It is the finest Indian film for a generation.⁸

If not “visual poetry,” some might ask, could there be both “political courage” and a “humanist message” in some Indian

⁶ One remarkable element in Mehta’s film is its extraordinary representations of *suttee*. For *suttee* is an almost taboo subject in most of India today. Yet Deepa Mehta deliberately focussed on this subject, as she had focussed in previous films on such equally taboo subjects in India as lesbianism and India’s murderous partition. Indeed, in a tragic and cinematic irony, fire destroyed her first attempts to film *suttee*. Hindu fundamentalist mobs destroyed her sets, props, and rushes in 2000 in Varanasi, like Vrindavan a holy city for Hindus in the state of Uttar Pradesh. In 2004, she reshot the entire film in Sri Lanka. And this is the film we may now see in Europe and elsewhere.

⁷ The reference to Ray is important. For Deepa Mehta was a former protégé of the master Indian film director of the previous generation, Satyajit Ray, the director of “*Pather Panchali*,” the final film of his renowned trilogy. And this was the trilogy that strongly influenced such widely regarded European film directors as both Michelangelo Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman who died on the same day, July 30, 2007.

⁸ *The Economist*, October 22, 2005, p. 89.

women's refusals of *suttee*? And could coming to appreciate several practices of religious widows help resolve several persisting disagreements about, say, the possibility of partial or relative personal identity?

Both seem unlikely. For many philosophers today are understandably impatient with cross-cultural talk about the non-rational and the transcendent.

Still, in other areas of contemporary inquiry, similar questions have proved rewarding. For example, one informed observer has called attention to "how Western political theory addresses the non-rational and transcendent, and has suggested that Western political theory can be enriched by exploring non-Western perspectives on debates about co-existence."⁹ Could something similar prove true for some philosophical debates about personal identity?

Moreover, many philosophers have traditionally shown critical interest in understanding some anthropological material. For instance, Kant's portside chats in Königsberg with disembarking sailors certainly proved useful for his reflections on philosophical anthropology, if not on the transcendental ego. As the distinguished English philosopher, John Cottingham, has argued in detail, assessing the rationality and truth of religious beliefs requires close attention to larger contexts than many philosophers today consider pertinent.¹⁰ Allow me then to continue for another moment with *suttee*.

One reviewer of Mehta's film offered a rather striking reflection. He wrote at first about "the plight of India's widows, who

⁹ Francis Robinson, in his review of R. Euben's *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton: PUP, 2007), *TLS*, August 24 & 31, 2007, p. 40.

¹⁰ J. Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), pp. 202-126. See also J. Cottingham's review of Anthony Kenny's *What I Believe* (New York: Continuum 2005), *TLS*, November 17, 2006. Cf. Gottorm Floistad's, "A Note on Religious Identity and Cultural Identity," unpublished paper, *Institut international de philosophie*, 2007.

are often regarded as non-persons.” Later, however, he reported that, although *suttee* is illegal, “many widows still suffer under an extreme interpretation of a 2,000-year-old Hindu tradition whereby a wife is half of her husband... when he dies, she is in effect half-dead too, and should be consigned to an ashram or house of confinement.” (Or, some continue to hold, to the flames).¹¹

In situations like these, one perplexing matter is how to understand exactly the metaphysical status, not of all India’s widows, but of many of the sincerely believing and practicing Hindus among them.

Are these religious women to be properly understood as presently non-persons? Or, since their bereavements, as continuously half-persons? Or as incomplete persons? Or as “half-dead” persons? Or as something else altogether?

Someone might argue not unreasonably that, since their spouses whose personhood they sincerely believed they once shared are now no longer living, these religious widows themselves are now no more than half persons. But, since personhood like pregnancy is, arguably, all or nothing, being half a person comes to being no person at all.

Someone else might argue that, since their spouses whose personhood they sincerely believed they once shared are now no longer living this life – they are waiting upon reincarnation (somewhere?) in another – these religious widows themselves are now not half-persons but merely incomplete persons.

And still another might suggest that these religious widows have no one single and singular identity as persons. They have simultaneous multiple identities. They are at the same time women, who politically are citizens of India, whose marital state is widowhood, who economically are pensioners, who religiously

¹¹ We should note that in Vrindavan “nine-tenths of widows surveyed say they are against the practice [of remarrying]. That includes many widowed in their youth: two-fifths were married before they were 12 years old, while nearly a third were widowed by the time they were 24” (*The Economist*, August 18, 2007).

adhere to central beliefs of Hinduism, who socially have chosen to become pilgrim widows, and so on.

§3. Reminders

Personal identity in cross-cultural contexts then remains confusing. Assembling several reminders about what we are talking about when we talk about personal identity in English today may prove helpful.¹² Here are but eight relatively important ones.

Firstly, we need to distinguish between identity in logical contexts and in non-logical ones.¹³ Our concerns here are mainly with identity in non-logical contexts, indeed in the metaphysical contexts of persons.¹⁴

Secondly, we need to recall the diversity of views today about what persons are. Quassim Cassam has helpfully contrasted five contemporary views on this issue which we may summarize as follows.

On a (1) *purely functional* (Lockean) view, “possession of a range of specific psychological capacities is both necessary

¹² In much English language philosophy today, the “classic” texts on “the problem of personal identity” are most often taken to be those of Locke, Butler, Reid, and Hume. See the main texts in the influential collection, *Personal Identity*, ed. J. Perry (Berkeley: UCal Press, 1975). An influential collection of contemporary papers that rely mainly on such texts is *The Identities of Persons*, ed. A. Rorty (Berkeley: UCal Press, 1976).

¹³ See, for example, S. Blackburn, “Identity,” in his *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 178. The citation is from “The Paradox of Identity,” in *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. J. Perry et al., 4th ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 784.

¹⁴ Q. Cassam, “Persons,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. T. Honderich, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 692-693. A short yet comprehensive collection of texts on the notion of “person” taken from the history of philosophy can be found in *Person: Philosophische Texte von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. M. Brassler (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), with selected bibliography. A comprehensive discussion of the historical texts can be found in the standard reference work, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 12 vols. (Basel: Franke, 1971-2006), p. v.

and sufficient for being a person. The characteristics in question are determinable a priori by reference to our concept of a person.”¹⁵ In his 1689 *Essay on Human Understanding* Locke himself wrote that a person is “a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places.”¹⁶

On a (2) *primitive-concept* view of the person (P. F. Strawson), the concept of a person is “primitive” in the sense that “it is of a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and those ascribing corporeal characteristics are equally applicable to a single individual of that single type.”¹⁷

On an (3) *animal attribute view* (David Wiggins), “a person is any animal that is such by its kind as to have the biological capacity to enjoy fully an open-ended list of psychological attributes. The list of attributes is to be filled in by reference to the class of actual persons.”¹⁸

On a (4) *neo-Lockean view*, a person is something in which obtain certain relations of physical connectedness (corporeal persistence) and psychological continuities (mental persistence). Since such continuities are “not all or nothing,” some have drawn the conclusion that persons have an ontological status akin to those of “clubs” or “nations”.

Finally for now, on a (5) *brain identity view*, a person is what underlies her psychological capacities, namely her brain. And so on.

Thirdly, in discussing personal identity we are concerned mainly with certain salient features of persons. Many would ar-

¹⁵ Q. Cassam, “Persons,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2005), pp. 692-693.

¹⁶ J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II. xxvii. 9, p. 335.

¹⁷ P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1959), p. 101, 102.

¹⁸ D. Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 172.

gue that such central features include “rationality, command of language, self-consciousness, control or agency, and moral worth or title to respect.”¹⁹ Another is the identity of a person. Whether such central features also characterise in the same way the identities of groups and of nations continues to occupy many political and social philosophers today.²⁰

Whether personhood itself is “an amalgam of an essentially separate mind and body” or “some one thing logically capable of being described in bodily or mental terms” remains deeply controversial. Indeed, questions about personal identity also raise issues about sameness. Here we may reasonably remain, if not sceptical about mind-body issues, at least agnostic.²¹

Recall, fourthly, that the expression, “personal identity” mainly designates two different matters. The fuller expression, “personal identity *at a time*,” designates “the *unity* of experience and thought that we each enjoy in normal living.” The expression, “personal identity *through time*,” designates what makes the *identity* of a single person survive some sequence of important physical or psychological changes.²²

In the case of some pious Hindu widows, their personal identity seems to be at issue both at a time, right now, as well as through a time from before their widowhood until now and up to their own future demise. In both cases what seems centrally important to their identity as persons is their “unity of

¹⁹ S. Blackburn, “Person,” in *The Oxford Dictionary to Philosophy*, (2nd ed. Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 273.

²⁰ On several recent critical observations on the newly controversial notion of “*identité nationale*” in France, see, among a plethora of articles, the debate between the historian, Max Gallo, and the philosopher, Alain Finkielkraut in *Le Monde*, March 15, 2007. Contrast these views with those of K. A. Appiah in his two books, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: PUP, 2007) and *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), and the critical comments of Stephen Darwall in his “I Do What I Am,” *TLS*, April 27, 2007.

²¹ Cf. Sven Rosenkranz, “Agnosticism as a Third Stance,” *Mind* 116 (2007), 55-104.

²² Blackburn 2005, p. 273.

experience and thought.” But we remember that “identity” and “unity” are not synonymous terms. So, we may require still another reminder.

We recall then, fifthly, that *identity* is the reflexive, transitive, and symmetrical relation “that holds between any object and itself.”²³

That is, we recall that identity is a reflexive relation in the sense that every X is identical with itself just as every Y is identical with itself. Identity is also a transitive relation in that, if X is identical with Y, then Y is identical with X. And identity is a symmetrical relation in that, if X is identical with Y, and Y is identical with Z, then X is identical with Z. Thus, if X is identical with Y, then there is only one thing that is both X and Y.

If we hold that identity is this special kind of relation that holds between any thing and itself, then one might say that, by contrast, *unity* is “the relation that must hold between occurrences or stages or instances [or parts] of [something] for these to be occurrences, stages, or instances [or parts] of a single [something].”²⁴

We know that the identity and unity of something may not be quite the same depending on the kind of thing at issue. Thus, numbers are one kind of thing, material objects²⁵

²³ J. Perry, “Glossary” in his *Identity, Personal Identity, and the Self* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), p. 254. See also his discussions on pp. 65-66.

²⁴ Note that, like personal identity, personal unity also admits of various kinds, such as the unity of general bodily feeling, the unity of perceptual experiences, the unity of occurrent thoughts and moods, the unity of consciousness, and so on. See Michael Tye’s discussions “Kinds of Unity and Kinds of Consciousness,” in his *Consciousness and Persons: Unity and Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 1-15.

²⁵ On recent controversy about the identity and unity of material things see, for example, Kit Fine, “The Non-Identity of a Material Thing and its Matter,” *Mind* 112 (2003), 195-234; Bryan Frances, “The New Leibniz’s Law Arguments for Pluralism,” *Mind* 115 (2006), 1007-1021; Jeffrey C. King, “Semantics for Monists,” *Mind* 115 (2006), 1023-1058; and Fine’s rejoinder, “Arguing for Non-Identity: A Response to King and Frances,” *Mind* 115 (2006), 1059-1082.

another, and persons still another.²⁶ Perhaps we may provisionally agree to understand persons here as Roderick Chisholm did in one of his last writings on categories as “contingent individual substances.”²⁷

One might then say that the expression “personal identity at a time” designates the reflexive, transitive, and symmetrical relation of identity that constitutes the supposed unity of the occurrences of a single person’s experiences.

On this view, the unity of the experience of personal identity of devout Hindu widows, among others, is the unity of persons understood provisionally as contingent individual substances.²⁸

§4. Criteria

Sixthly, philosophers usually say that unity, identity, and personal identity have criteria for their application. But talk of criteria for personal identity is often vague because sometimes important distinctions are overlooked. Recall then three ways in which we usually use the word, “criteria,” with respect to personal identity.²⁹

²⁶ See, for example, Roderick Chisholm’s own summary of his theory of categories in *A Realistic Theory of Categories: An Essay in Ontology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996). In the diagram he presents in one of his last writings, “A Theory of Categories,” in *The Philosophy of Roderick M. Chisholm*, ed. L. E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), p. 34. There, R. Chisholm takes persons as “contingent individual substances” that are not “boundaries.”

²⁷ Chisholm 1997, p. 34.

²⁸ Chisholm adds, controversially, that as contingent individual substances persons are not boundaries either. Cf. Jonathan Lowe’s view: “objects that possess them [concepts as “ways of thinking of entities”] are thinking subjects, that is, persons” [*The Four-Category Ontology: A Metaphysical Foundation for Natural Science* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 85; his emphases]. Contrast Lowe’s positions with the more classical views of Michael Loux in “Concrete Particulars II: Persistence Through Time,” in his *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 215-249.

²⁹ John Perry, *Identity, Personal Identity and the Self, Selected Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), pp. 252-253.

In ordinary English parlance, talk of criteria is talk of “indications we rely on to establish something; good criteria are indications that have some kind of blessing from science, tradition, or official politics” and so on. For example, we may talk ordinarily of fingerprints as “criteria for identity for persons.”³⁰

In philosophical parlance, however, English-language talk of criteria usually refers to Frege’s identity criteria for different categories or kinds of objects.³¹ This second use of the word, “criteria,” is important both historically – Peter Geach’s discussions of “relative identity”³² probably go back to this translation – and substantively – what we understand as being criteria for personal identity may not be understood as criteria in the same sense for, say, statues.

A different philosophical use of the expression, “criteria,” is “connected with the nature of X and the meanings of the terms we use to talk about X’s.”³³ This third use is also important. For mak-

³⁰ J. Perry notes however that “sameness of fingerprints is neither necessary nor sufficient for personal identity on conceptual grounds alone.”

³¹ In these contexts, talk of criteria still remains strongly derivative from J. L. Austin’s 1960 English translation of Frege’s expression, “Kennzeichen für die Gleichheit”, in Frege’s 1884 *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, as “criterion of identity.” “Frege’s identity criteria,” J. Perry believes, “are related to different categories or kinds of objects, and... understanding criteria of identity is closely related to understanding the objects in question and the terms that refer to them.” In the phenomenological tradition compare Roman Ingarden’s account of objects in his “*Die Formale Struktur des Gegenstandes*,” in *Über das Wesen*, ed. P. McCormick (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), pp. 251-286.

³² P. Geach, *Reference and Generality* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1962), especially pp. 151-152. See also D. Wiggins, *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967); Geach’s articles, “Identity,” *Review of Metaphysics* 21 (1967), 3-12; and “A Reply,” *Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1969), 556-559; and John Perry’s criticisms in his “The Same F,” *The Philosophical Review* 79 (1970), 181-200.

³³ Sidney Shoemaker in his widely influential book, *Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1963) took this tack in investigating personal identity. See also his *Identity, Cause, and Mind: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984), and his *The First Person Perspective and Other Essays* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996).

ing a distinction between “the factors that make something the case” and the factors “that constitute evidence for it is crucial.”

What makes some beliefs for the practice of *suttee* motivation³⁴ for exploring a view about personal identity in terms of composite identity, for example, is not the same thing as taking the practice of *suttee* as constituting evidence for a composite view about personal identity. That is, we need to avoid confusing *criteria for* personal identity with the *relation of* personal identity.³⁵

Memorably, in his celebrated 1976 paper, “Entity and Identity,” P. F. Strawson, offered a useful defense against falling into such a confusion.³⁶ There, he made what he called a “terminological suggestion.” His suggestion was that “the application of the familiar phrase, ‘criterion of identity,’ should be restricted to those cases in which the supposed criteria can be precisely and strictly stated in a clearly applicable form...” Classical cases in which this condition is satisfied are “criteria of identity for directions of straight lines and for the number of members of sets.”

Strawson went on to assert that “this demanding condition is clearly not satisfied in the cases of ordinary substantial individuals such as dogs or men. So the suggestion has the consequence that we should, contrary to our normal practice in philosophy, give up using the phrase ‘criterion of identity’ in the case of such substances.”

However, he notably qualified this consequence “by adding that, since the possession of the relevant substance-concept ‘dog’ or ‘man’, certainly equips us to answer identity – questions about individuals of the kinds in question, it is legitimate to say that each such concept provides us with a principle of identity for all individuals of the kind, even though the principle is not to count as a criterion of identity in the strict sense recommended.”

³⁴ On difficulties with different motivations for articulating a philosophical account of personal identity see David W. Shoemaker, “Personal Identity and Practical Concerns,” *Mind* 116 (2007), 317-357.

³⁵ See J. Perry, p. 254.

³⁶ P. F. Strawson 1998, p. 2.

Of course, there are principles and principles. There are, to take just a handful, principles of contradiction and of non-contradiction, of excluded middle, of sufficient reason, of individuation, of verification, of utility, of double effect. And, perhaps especially, there is also the principle of charity, the principle of maximizing the truth in what others may be saying.

What then, seventhly, is a principle of personal identity as opposed to a criterion of personal identity? Let us say that, if we agree to take a criterion as not a necessary but a sufficient condition for something, then we may agree to stipulate here that a principle is a weaker condition for something. We may take a principle, that is, as neither necessary nor sufficient.³⁷

One might then talk more loosely of principles of personal identity rather of criteria for personal identity. What one would be looking for would be just such principles or weak conditions that would allow a reasonable grasp on the slippery idea that some persons, like some pious Hindu widows today, may properly be said to share their identities as persons with their deceased spouses.

Finally, we need to recall that referring to one's own personal identity in contrast to talking about the personal identity of others remains puzzling. It is one thing for my friend, Indira, to talk of her husband, Veer, as having lost half his identity in dying; it is quite another for Indira to talk of herself as having lost half her identity in his dying.

³⁷ Like Sidney Shoemaker, then, were we to go looking for a principle of personal identity that might help us parse perplexing talk about possibly shared personal identities between the widowed Indira and her deceased husband, Veer, we would be looking for neither necessary nor sufficient conditions of personal identity. Some philosophers might find such lack of ambition to be unduly minimalist. But in many cross-cultural contexts, for example, those where some Indian women's understanding of themselves is at stake, an understanding for which they continuously consent to undergo protracted personal suffering, perhaps a deeply respectful discretion on the part of their philosophical friends from other cultures may not be inappropriate.

§5. Self-Reference

P. F. Strawson's 1997 exchanges with John McDowell on issues of self-reference are reminders of Wittgenstein's distinction in *The Blue Book* between the use of "I" (or 'my') as object" and the use of "I' (or 'my') as subject."³⁸

Thus, when I use the expression "I" as object, as in utterances such as "I broke my arm" or "my arm is broken," it is possible for me to be mistaken. By contrast, when I use "I" as subject, as in utterances such as "I have a toothache" or "my tooth hurts," it is not possible for me to be mistaken. In the first case, the expression, "I," "serve[s] to refer to a particular person"; in the second, the expression, "I," does not refer to any particular person at all.³⁹

In other words, the use of "I" as subject is an expression of what Elizabeth Anscombe called "unmediated consciousness" and of what Strawson called a "non-referential" use of "I."⁴⁰ That is, the use of "I" is referential. This use refers to the content of consciousness.

³⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), pp. 66-67, cited in J. McDowell, "Referring to Oneself," in *The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson*, ed. L. E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), pp. 129-145. See Strawson's response, "Reply to John McDowell," *ibid.*, pp. 146-150. Cf. Maximilian de Gaynesford's discussion of the first person term "I" not so much as just a deictic pronoun but as a way of making particular objects "salient" in his *The Meaning of the First Person Term* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

³⁹ J. McDowell, p. 129. McDowell cites *The Blue Book*: "It is as impossible that in making the statement 'I have a toothache' I should have mistaken another person for myself, as it is to moan with pain by mistake, having mistaken someone else for me."

⁴⁰ E. Anscombe, "The First Person," in *Mind and Language*, ed. S. Guttenplan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 45-65, reprinted in *Self-Knowledge*, ed. Quassim Cassam (Oxford: OUP, 1994), pp. 140-159. Besides Anscombe's paper, Cassam's collection includes a number of other important papers by Ryle, Davidson, Burge, S. Shoemaker, Chisholm, Castañeda, Perry, Evans, and P. F. Strawson. These papers are helpful in following rather closely continuing debates about identity and self-reference.

But some may think that the use of “I” as subject does not so much refer to the content of consciousness as much as it expresses that content. That is, the use of “I” as subject may neither ascribe any content to consciousness nor predicate any content of consciousness of any subject.

Strawson believed that the most intelligible cases of such ascriptions were those of “intentional action, including speech behaviour,” such as “intentionally undertaken bodily movements”⁴¹ where we have “self-consciousness in the full sense, awareness of oneself, one’s human self, (as acting)...”⁴² In these central cases, we use the expression “I” correctly “without any thought of appeal to criteria of personal identity...”⁴³

If this is right, then in first-person ascriptions, as when Indira says, “I am in pain,” we are to understand Indira as mainly talking about her own personal identity as her own unmediated self-consciousness. Plainly, however, if when making such first-person self-ascriptions Indira need not appeal to criteria

⁴¹ Cf. the two independent, articles by Henrik Ehrsson *et al.* working with epileptic persons at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm and the London Neurological Institute, and Olaf Blanke *et al.* working with virtual reality technologies at the *École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne* and Geneva University Hospital in *Science* (August 24, 2007). I have not yet been able to study these articles. But both *Le Monde* (August 25, 2007) and *The Economist* (August 25, 2007) have reported on them in some detail. Apparently, the articles describe experiments centred on replicating out of body experiences (the experience of “looking down on oneself from above”). These experiences in turn would enable closer neurological investigations of consciousness than have been possible so far by separating “the perceived self” from “the perceiver’s body.” The experiments seem to show a necessary link between multiple sensory awareness of one’s own body, centred perhaps in the brain’s right angular gyrus, that seems to integrate different sensory outputs, and both self-consciousness and self-identity. Some similar results have also been found by Alain Berthoz and his colleagues in Paris (cf. *Le Monde*, August 25, 2007).

⁴² Strawson, p. 148.

⁴³ Strawson, p. 149. He continues: “...and the fact, which impressed Wittgenstein, that this is so conspicuously true when ‘I’ is used to report current states of the user’s consciousness, is, as we should all agree, the deep and deceptive source of the Cartesian illusion, since it encourages the thought that the reference must be to some immaterial item.”

of personal identity, that fact alone cannot entail that Indira is making no reference to herself.

That is, when Indira says, “I am in pain,” Indira uses the expression “I” as subject without having to appeal to any criteria of personal identity. But when using “I” as subject, Indira is still using the expression “I” referentially; indeed, she must. “... the very understanding of ‘I,’” Strawson argued, “requires the understanding of it as referring to a subject which is also a corporeal being among others in an objective world, namely, a human being.”⁴⁴

In other words, when Indira uses the expression “I” in these central cases, she need not check her sentences to see whether she has gotten the reference right. For in these cases her expression is simply immune to the virus of mistaken reference.⁴⁵

When we return to the perplexing status of the personal identity of some religious Indian widows today with both the images of Deepa Mehta’s film in mind and these few conceptual reminders on hand, we may perhaps specify that perplexity further.

Among the salient features these women exhibit as persons, then, perhaps we may at least say that an apparent disjunction seems to hold between their identity and their unity as individual persons. That is, part of what we find perplexing is that any one of these religious widows like Indira can at the same time be both identical with herself and yet simultaneously enjoy but part and not her full unity as a person.

Surely Indira is identical with herself. But she sincerely believes herself to be no longer unified as a person since her husband, Veer, whom she understands to be her other half, passed away.

⁴⁴ Strawson, p. 147. Some importantly different views about self-referential matters are to be found in the recent work of Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am A Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007) where persons are understood as “emergent self-referential structures,” and in Uriah Kriegel’s thoughtful review, “Back to Back,” in the *TLS*, April 27, 2007.

⁴⁵ Cf. Strawson, p. 149.

Is Indira then asking me to understand that she, and so many devout Hindu widows like her, has one identity as a person or many, a singular or a plural identity, a single identity or multiple ones? Am I properly to understand her identity as a person as singular or plural, single or multiple?⁴⁶

§6. Multiple Identities

Now these reminders about self-consciousness and first-person reference, principles and criteria, things and persons, personal identity at and through, unity and identity, are partial indeed. For we have not recalled here so many other related matters such as selves⁴⁷ and subjects, propositional identity,⁴⁸ representational contexts,⁴⁹ personal

⁴⁶ Besides, in these cross-cultural contexts, just how justifiable is the supposition of a full disjunction between Indira's identity as a person and her unity as a person? And just what would properly, and respectfully, understanding such a disjunction come to? Just how could it be the case that, by losing her husband, Veer, Indira has lost her unity as a person while retaining her identity as a person? And how could it be the case that by choosing not to rejoin Veer immediately in some other world by immolating herself at his funeral, Indira now survives as but half a person only? Such specific queries, we should note, focus not on how to justify Indira's beliefs, but on whether the contents of what she believes is indeed the case.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Q. Cassam, *Self and World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁴⁸ On propositional identity recall that one way to describe the problem of personal identity is in terms of judgments about the identity of persons. Thus Paul Snowden describes personal identity as "the way philosophers refer to facts about persons which are expressed in identity judgments such as '[T]he person over there now is identical to the person was there yesterday,' the truth of which is a consequence of the fact that persons remain in existence over time. The problem is to say in an informative way what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for this kind of fact. These conditions are called criteria of identity." P. Snowden, "Personal Identity," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP Press, 2005), pp. 691-692.

⁴⁹ See especially N. Georgalis, *The Primacy of the Subjective: Foundations for a Unified Theory of Mind and Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006). See also J. Almäg, *Intentionality and Intersubjectivity* (Göteborg: *Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis*, 2007).

consciousness,⁵⁰ individuals and individuation,⁵¹ and so on.⁵²

Strawson himself called attention to one central matter we have omitted and to which we may now turn. “Could we have ‘I’ at all,” he asks, “without ‘you’ and ‘they’? Could we have ‘ago’ without ‘agis’ and ‘agunt’? Could we have personal consciousness without consciousness of other persons? The fact that we are social beings, or, at least beings aware of others of the same type as ourselves, is arguably no less central to self-consciousness than the fact that we are intentional-actualizing agents...”⁵³

In his 2005 book, *The Argumentative Indian*, Amartya Sen, does not go into issues like *suttee*.⁵⁴ He does, however, discuss multiple identities. Perhaps then some of his recent reflections may help us elucidate the obscure idea of a shared personal identity.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ See especially M. Tye, *Consciousness and Persons: Unity and Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), the comprehensive collection, *The Nature of Consciousness*, ed. Ned Block *et al.* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), N. Block, *Consciousness, Function, and Representation: Collected Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), and G. Strawson, *Consciousness and Its Place in Nature* (London: Atlantic Imprint, 2006).

⁵¹ See P. Mackie, *How Things Might Have Been: Individuals, Kinds, and Essential Properties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

⁵² On selves, see the important recent book of Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), and A. A. Long’s review, “Out of Bodies,” in the *TLS*, June 22, 2007.

⁵³ Strawson, p. 148; his emphasis.

⁵⁴ I refer here mainly to Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History, and Identity* (London: Penguin, 2005; hereafter cited as “Ar”), *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Allen Lane, 2006; hereafter, “IdV”), as well as to his *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999), and to his Romanes Lecture for 1998, *Reason Before Identity* (Oxford: OUP, 1998). Polly Vizard provides an excellent discussion of Sen’s views on ethics and economics but not on identity in her *Poverty and Human Rights: Sen’s “Capability Perspective” Explored* (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

⁵⁵ See “Appendix.”

Sen developed these ideas in his 2006 book, *Identity and Violence*.⁵⁶

Sen believes perspective is important. “The dependence on perspective,” he writes, “is not a special characteristic of the imagining of India alone. It is, in fact, a pervasive general feature in description and identification” (158).⁵⁷

Perspective of course is of different kinds. And we are not quite sure just what kind of perspective might be most pertinent for elucidating some perplexities about apparently shared personal identity.

In Sen’s own case, one kind of perspective on which some of his own most important reflections on multiple identities depend is his admiration for many of the views of Rabindranath Tagore.⁵⁸ Tagore argued indefatigably against what he called “the intense consciousness of the separateness of one’s own people from others.”

Sen has seen in Tagore’s claim a double target. For Tagore was arguing, “first, internally against an idea of India as a mixture of separated and alienated cultures and communities, sharply distinguished according to religion, or caste, or class, or gender, or language, or locations. Second, [Tagore was arguing] externally (that is, in relation to the world) ... against an intense sense of the dissociation of Indians from other people elsewhere” (349), against the idea of a “small India.”

Behind Tagore’s attacks against small India and nationalistic ideas of Indian identity, Sen believes, lie two quite general assumptions that Tagore was challenging. The first assump-

⁵⁶ Abbreviated hereafter as “*IdV*.” Unless otherwise indicated, page references in the text now are to *IdV*.

⁵⁷ A. Sen refers here to his treatments of these issues in two earlier papers, “Description as Choice,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 32 (1980), and “Positional Objectivity,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (1993), 126-145.

⁵⁸ Like Indira Gandhi and Satyajit Ray, Sen himself attended Tagore’s justly celebrated school in Santiniketan where Sen’s grandparents lived outside Dhaka in today’s Bangladesh. See A. Sen’s essay, “Tagore and His India,” in his *AI*, pp. 89-120.

tion is “that we must have a single – or at least a principal and dominant – identity” (350). And the second assumption is “that we ‘discover’ our identity, with no room for choice” (*Ibid.*). Like Tagore, Sen contests each of these assumptions.

Against the assumption of identity’s exclusiveness, Sen reminds us of the various identities persons can have in different contexts. “The same person,” he writes, “can be of Indian origin, a Parsee, a French citizen, a US resident, a woman, a poet, a vegetarian, an anthropologist, a university professor, a Christian, a bird watcher, and an avid believer in extraterrestrial life and of the propensity of alien creatures to ride around the cosmos in multicoloured UFOs.” (359).

In our concern with women like Indira, we may say that “the same person” may be of Indian origin, a Hindu, an Indian citizen, a woman, a believer in reincarnation, a pilgrim widow, and so on. “Each of these collectivities,” Sen continues, “to all of which this person belongs, gives him or her a particular identity. They can all have relevance, depending on the contexts. There is no conflict here, even though the priorities over these identities must be relative to the issue at hand (for example, the vegetarian identity may be more important when going to a dinner rather to a Consulate...)” (350).

And against the assumption that personal identity is a matter of discovery rather than of choice, Sen argues against communitarians like Michael Sandel who hold that community is not so much an attribute of identity but a constituent of identity, “only a matter of self-realization” (5) coming before reasoning and choice.⁵⁹

Sen grants that sometimes certain exacting feasibility conditions in some circumstances may constrain one’s choice of

⁵⁹ A. Sen discusses M. Sandel’s *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 1998) in his *Reason Before Identity* (Oxford: OUP, 1989). The debate on the communitarian critique of liberalism, roughly Sandel versus John Rawls can be followed in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989) and in Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

identity. Think of Indira's widowhood perhaps constraining her choice of identity. But he claims that "the point at issue is not whether any identity whatever can be chosen (that would be an absurd claim), but whether we have choices over alternative identities or combinations of identities, and perhaps more importantly, whether we have some freedom in deciding what priority to give to the various identities that we may simultaneously have" (351).

Subsequently, Sen is clearer about the kind of independence both reasoning and choice have in determining identities. This independence is relative. For he thinks that other factors, especially social ones, also have important roles to play in the determination of identities. "...there may be significant external influences," Sen writes. "...not everything turns specifically on the nature of reasoning and choice" (*IdV*: 25).

This clarification is needed, he continues, "since the role of choice has to be understood after taking note of the other influences that restrict or restrain the choices one can make. For one thing, the importance of a particular identity will depend on the social context... Also, not all identities need have durable importance." (*Ibid.*). In our case, however, it is not evident that the importance of the particular identity Indira may choose depends more on her social context than on her religious context. Her religious beliefs seem to be central.

Sen concludes that "identity is thus a quintessentially plural concept, with varying relevance of different identities in distinct contexts. And, most importantly, we have choice over what significance to attach to our different identities. ... [Further,] choice of priorities between different identities, including what relative weights to attach to their respective demands, cannot be only a matter of discovery. They [choices] are inescapably decisional, and demand reason – not just recognition" (352-353).

Note, however, that choice comes into Sen's summary under two headings and not just under one. Thus, "two different, though interrelated, exercises are involved here," he

writes: “(1) deciding on what our relevant identities are, and (2) weighing the relative importance of these different identities. Both tasks demand reasoning and choice” (*IdV*: 24). We may add that both also involve more than usual intellectual ability, one reflection only of the very strong rationalist strain in Sen’s work.

§7. Multiple Categories

In *Identity and Violence* Sen made explicit his underlying idea that multiple identities depend on multiple categories.

Sen began by distinguishing between the idea of a person’s being identical with himself or herself, and a person’s sharing an identity with others (xii). This distinction is especially important. For the very idea of social identity, he believes, usually turns on the notion of a person’s sharing an identity with others.

Moreover, “many contemporary political and social issues,” Sen writes, “revolve around conflicting claims of disparate identities involving different groups, since the conception of identity influences, in many different ways, our thoughts and actions” (*Ibid.*).

The conception of identity certainly seems to influence in many ways the thoughts and actions of the religious Hindu widows in Vrindavan. But just how they influence their notion of a shared personal identity is what some of us would like to understand better.

The notion of social identity itself, however, needs elaboration. Accordingly, Sen contrasts social identity with what he calls “unique identity.” While the reality of social identity is evident – Sen talks of “our inescapable plural identities” – unique identity, he repeats here, is a dangerous illusion. For the belief in a unique identity, “the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity” (xv), is what promotes violence. In contrast with social identity that often promotes cooperation, “violence is promoted by the cultivation of a sense of inevitability about some allegedly

unique – often belligerent – identity that we are supposed to have...”

Further, an essential element in the idea of social identity is the inevitability of personal choice. “Given our inescapably plural identities, we have to decide on the relative importance of our different associations and affiliations in any particular context. Central to leading a human life, therefore, are [*sic*] the responsibilities of choice and reasoning” (*Ibid.*).

Here, however, Sen seems not sufficiently clear as to whether the belief in a unique identity is the dangerous illusion in question, or whether the belief both in a unique identity and in a choiceless identity is the illusion. These need not be the same. Some religious Hindu widows, for example, may perhaps accept to have a unique identity imposed upon them, while others may perhaps choose a unique identity for themselves.

Moreover, Sen may seem to move too quickly. For while surely having to concur that persons are normally members of any variety of different groups, and that consequently persons’ social identities are “inescapably plural,” some may not be so sure that all personal identities are also “inescapably plural.” For personal identities are not – to use Sen’s own earlier, rather vague expression – “the same thing” as social identities.⁶⁰

Sen’s fuller point, however, is not just that personal identities are multiple and hence entail inevitable reasoning and choices about the relative importance of any sub-set of these multiples. Personal identities are different. Indeed Sen says memorably that personal identities are “diversely different.”

Accordingly, Sen thinks that we require a “clearer understanding of the pluralities of human identity, and ... appreciation that they cut across each other and work against a sharp separation along one single hardened line of impenetrable di-

⁶⁰ On “same” see the symposium on David W (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Review* 71 (2005), 442-476 with Wiggins’s “Précis,” articles of Uwe Meixner, “The Rationality of (a Form of) Relative Identity.”

visions. ... We have to see clearly that we have many distinct affiliations and can interact with each other in a great many different ways" (xiv).

Here again, however, Sen seems to leave it unclear as to whether the identities that "cut across each other" can be not just social but personal identities as well. In speaking of persons having "many distinct affiliations," he seems to be speaking of social identities only as the kind of identities that may be properly taken to "cut across each other." Whether personal identities can do so too remains obscure.

Sen concludes soberly: "...conceptual disarray, and not just nasty intentions, significantly contribute to the turmoil and barbarity we see around us. The neglect of the plurality of our affiliations [that is, our belonging to many and not just to one "membership group" or "membership category" (19)] and of the need for choice and reasoning obscures the world in which we live" (*Ibid.*).

Behind Sen's particular views here about multiple identities, whether social or personal or both, are his more general views about categories.

In support of multiple identities, for example, he alludes to multiple classifications. "There are a great variety of categories to which we simultaneously belong," Sen writes (19). And what "shapes the world in which we actually live," and what conclusively undermines any finally substantive commitment to unique identities, to "the odd presumption that the people of the world can be uniquely categorized according to some *singular and overarching* system of partitioning," Sen thinks, is what he calls "the universe of plural and diverse classifications..." (xii and xvi; Sen's emphases).

For personal identity, there is no "singular membership category," no "one allegedly dominant system of classification... in terms of religion, or community, or culture, or nation, or civilization" (xiii). As Sen writes later, "the illusion of unique identity is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse

classifications that characterize the world in which we actually live" (17).⁶¹

To clarify, Sen picks up on Sartre's famous remarks about the anti-Semite making the Jew. Sen suggests that "charged attributions can incorporate two distinct but interrelated distortions." The first is the "misdescription of people belonging to a targeted category." And the second is "an insistence that the misdescribed characteristics are the only relevant features of the targeted person's identity" (*Ibid.*). The opposition here is between holding for "a choiceless singularity of human identity" (16) instead of "seeing the many-dimensional nature of diverse human beings" (15).

Another way to see his point about multiple categories for appropriately describing persons turning on the presence or absence of choice is to note Sen's distinction between what he believes are two separate types of mistaken "reductionism" in much contemporary social and economic analysis.

The first kind of social science reductionism is what Sen calls "identity disregard." This is the mistake of disregarding how persons share multiple identities with other persons, and hence how these shared identities influence persons' values, aims, objectives, and behaviours. The second kind of social science reductionism is "singular affiliation." This is the mistake of assuming that "any person pre-eminently belongs, for all practical purposes, to one collectivity only..." (20).

In both cases, however, Sen seems to be talking here once again about social identity and not personal identity. Thus, we

⁶¹ That is, persons share identities by reason of their belonging to many different and diverse associations as well as by reason of their enjoying many different and diverse affiliations (p. 13). In talking of "associations" and "affiliations," Sen seems again to have in mind primarily social identities. He adds, however, that because of these associations and affiliations, persons themselves share many attributions. And here, in speaking of "attributions," he seems to have in mind primarily something more than social identities. Considering mis-attributions, or what Sen calls "charged attributions" and "degrading attributions" (p. 7), helps clarify his views about multiple identities and multiple categories.

may denominate the two mistakes less ambiguously as “social identity disregard” and “singular social affiliation.”

These mistakes underline the importance of the social for particularizing relevant identities. “...whether a particular classification can plausibly generate a sense of identity or not must depend on social circumstances,” Sen writes here (26). Thus some classifications may be important not so much for mainly intellectual reasons but for “social arrangements” (27).

In sum, social contexts are quite important for determining the classifications that strongly influence identities. “The reasoning in the choice of relevant identities must,” Sen claims, “...go well beyond the purely intellectual into contingent social significance. Not only is reason involved in the choice of identity, but the reasoning may have to take note of the social context and contingent relevance of being in one category or another” (27-28).⁶²

The basic question Sen is at pains to elucidate is just how we are to view human beings. For Sen, answering this question comes down finally to settling, for the right reasons, on the appropriate basic categories.

Thus, Sen asks whether human beings should “be categorized in terms of inherited traditions, particularly the inherited

⁶² We now can see that some persons may belong to some membership groups that are in the same category such as religion, whereas other persons may belong to some membership groups in different categories such as religion, nationality, and profession. In the first case Sen wants to speak of “non-contrasting identities,” whereas in the second of “contrasting identities” (p. 28). His point is that one person can have plural identities even within contrasting categories, as a citizenship example clearly shows. For a person may have dual citizenship and hence experience conflicts of loyalty, priorities, and demands. Thus, a strong connection holds between multiple identities and plural commitments. “...the understanding of a plurality of commitments,” Sen writes, “and appreciation of the coexistence of multiple identities are extremely important...” (p. 99). Resolving such difficulties requires reasoning within social contexts in order to choose rationally a specific hierarchy of loyalties. “It is not so much that a person has to deny one identity to give priority to another,” Sen writes, “but rather that a person with plural identities has to decide, in case of a conflict, on the relative importance of the different identities for the particular decision in question” (p. 29).

religion, of the community in which they happen to be born, taking that unchosen identity to have automatic priority over other affiliations involving politics, profession, class, gender, language, literature, social involvements, and many other connections? Or should they be understood as persons with many affiliations and associations the priorities over which they must themselves choose (taking the responsibility that comes from reasoned choice)?” (150).

In a word, Sen’s views about multiple identities and multiple categories would seem to come down to views about multiple social identities and multiple social categories. However helpful, then, these broader reflections on identity remain for contextualizing our concerns with some persons sincerely believing that that are but half-persons, we need to narrow our focus and to look more sharply at whether the idea of partial personal identities is coherent.

§8. Partial Identities

Are we then to say that, in addition to of their plural social identities, some religious Hindu widows in Vrindavan also have plural personal identities? For example, may we properly hold that Indira shares her personal identity with her husband, Veer, in the sense that her personal identity is “relative” to the personal identity of her deceased husband?

Now, the key metaphysical idea here in talk about the relative identity of one person with another is composition. There are two basic kinds, complete composition and restricted composition.

Complete composition corresponds to the metaphysical view that, “a single composite is *literally identical* with the many things that compose it.”⁶³

⁶³ T. Merricks, “Composition and Vagueness,” *Mind* 114 (2005), 629; his emphases. Merricks cites Baxter (1988), Lewis (1991), Searle (1992), and Armstrong (1997) as holding this view – D. L. M. Baxter, “Identity in the Loose and Popular Sense,” *Mind* 97 (1988), 575-582; D. Lewis, *Parts of*

For example, since my body has many atoms as its proper parts, my body is a completely composite object, a physical object. By contrast, restricted composition is the metaphysical view that there are some objects with proper parts, that is, composite objects, and that some composite objects “jointly compose nothing at all.”⁶⁴

For example, since loving Veer Indira can combine her heart with his heart, their hearts, as some Sanskrit poets once said, are one. But, literally speaking, Indira’s heart and Veer’s heart jointly compose nothing at all.⁶⁵ So, how could their hearts be relatively one in the sense that their hearts make up their composite personal identity?

Some current philosophical debate hinges on whether composition personal identity can be restricted. In other words, is relative identity as restricted composition intelligible?

One good argument suggests that restricted composition is not intelligible.

“Restricted composition,” this argument goes, “says that some objects – for example, the *xs* [think of hearts] – have a sum, but others – for example, the *ys* [think of Indira and Veer] – do not. This is an ontological distinction: the *xs* exist [that is, Indira’s heart and Veer’s heart exist], and, moreover, something exists composed of them [some would say, their love exists]; the *ys* exist [that is, Indira and Veer exist] and nothing exists composed of them.

But, this ontological distinction arguably makes no sense *given composition as identity* [that is, the idea that “a single composite [say here, a person] is *literally identical* with the many things [say here, atoms] that compose it”] ... [For] once we’ve

Classes (Oxford: Blackwells, 1991), p. 80; J. R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 113; and D. Armstrong, *A World of States of Affairs* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), p. 12.

⁶⁴ Merricks 2005, p. 615.

⁶⁵ The first example here is from Merricks (*Ibid.*); the second is my own and incorporates several modifications and I believe corrections to Merricks’s own further example.

endorsed the existence of the *xs* and the *ys*, we have thereby endorsed the existence of their sums, which sums are nothing additional ontologically, nothing more in terms of what exists.”⁶⁶

This is a strong argument against restricted composition and hence against the existence of restricted composites.⁶⁷ But without the notion of restricted composites, the very idea of some middle ontological ground existing between the separate identities of two persons (say, Indira and Veer) is not viable.⁶⁸

What we need then is a cogent critique of at least some strong anti-restriction arguments. And, since those kinds of arguments depend necessarily on a certain idea of “composition as identity” – we need a cogent critique of composition as identity in this sense.

May I now suggest that such a critique can unfold in either one of two basic forms?

Either one may work from a particular position inside some species of contemporary philosophy of language, similar say to the one Paul Ricoeur suggested, not uncontroversially, by insisting on the symbolic character of linguistic expression, as

⁶⁶ A closely related argument goes: “Along these same lines, to deny that the *ys* have a sum is — *given composition as identity* — to deny the existence of something that, were it to exist, would be (identical with) the *ys*. But it seems nonsensical to deny the existence of something that would, if it existed, be (identical with) things whose existence one affirms.” Merricks, 2005, pp. 629-630; my emphasis.

⁶⁷ See however the criticisms of Elizabeth Barnes in her “Vagueness and Arbitrariness: Merricks on Composition,” *Mind* 116 (2007), 105-113. Barnes cites among others *Fictionalism in Metaphysics*, ed. Mark Kalderon (Oxford: OUP, 2005), Theodore Sider, “Against Vague Existence,” *Philosophical Studies* 114 (2003), 135-146, and Daniel Nolan, “Vagueness, Multiplicity, and Parts,” *Nous* 40 (2006), 716-737.

⁶⁸ See T. Merricks’s rejoinder to Barnes, “Remarks on Vagueness and Arbitrariness,” *Mind* 116 (2007), 115-119. Merricks cites among others Theodore Sider’s “Four-Dimensionalism,” *Philosophical Review* 106 (1997), 197-231, Sider’s book, *Four Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), and Merricks’s *Objects and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), *Truth and Ontology* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

one means to accommodate the “semantic residues” of any strictly literal approach to semantics.⁶⁹ And then one moves to qualify the understanding of a single composite like a person being symbolically identical and not just either literally or metaphorically identical with the many things that compose it.

This move opens up some middle ontological ground for exploration of group or composite identities.⁷⁰

Or one may work from a position inside contemporary metaphysics, similar say to one that Jaegwon Kim might use, again not uncontroversially, to challenge robust versions of generalized metaphysical materialism as a reasonable way to accommodate *qualia* and consciousness in the philosophy of mind. And then one moves to qualify any fully generalized reductive metaphysical materialism with some version of a non-reductive view.

This move again opens up some middle ground for exploration of persons as instantiating restricted rather than complete composition.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Cf. P. McCormick, “*Littéralement dépourvu de sens*,” *Philosophiques* 32 (2005), 55-82.

⁷⁰ See for example Carole Rovane, *The Bounds of Agency: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics* (Princeton: PUP, 1998), pp. 137-141, who holds for the notion of a “group person” as a kind of social whole, that is, a separate ontological kind comprising several individual persons but not being the “same” individual person as either one of its constituent persons. Note that Rovane reaches this position with other means than those relying on a critique of the “literal.” See also Peter Strawson’s critical remarks on Donald Davidson’s discussions of problem of predication, that is, just what is it that links the subject as a particular concrete individual with the predicate as a universal, abstract object, in his article, “Lost Properties,” *TLS*, September 30, 2005, 4.

⁷¹ See for example Jaegwon Kim’s *Mind in a Physical World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), Ch. 4, and *Physicalism or Something Near Enough* (Princeton: PUP, 2005), pp. 161-173. Compare, however, John Perry’s quite nuanced position on what he calls “antecedent physicalism” in his *Knowledge, Possibility, and Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001). See also Michael Friedman’s brief discussion of “potential parts metaphysics” vs. “actual parts metaphysics” in his article, “Zeno’s Sums,” *TLS*, June 3, 2005.

This suggestion about two different ways of developing a critique of strong anti-restriction arguments and thereby opening the door to a less unsatisfactory notion of restricted composition and of Indira and Veer sharing a restricted composite personal identity brings me now to conclude rather speculatively with two questions for further reflection.

§9. Indira and Veer

Indira, the pilgrim widow in Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh, continues to suffer greatly both bereavement and extreme social exclusion. Indira regularly remembers details of her previous life together with Veer. She also regularly explores some of these details imaginatively within her sincere Hindu beliefs about reincarnation.

She has through memory and imagination habituated herself to thinking of Veer, and of so many others just like him and her in their past and present sufferings, to be part of her own sufferings as a person. And, spiritually, she practices her beliefs by going through her spiritual exercises of chanting six hours a day.

That is, Indira is not strictly identical with Veer in her sufferings, but in her sufferings she seems to be relatively identical with Veer. Indira does not think of herself in strictly Hindu terms as later “reincarnating” in some other life any of her own merits as Veer’s presently already reincarnated spouse.

Rather, she thinks of herself here and now as having through memory and imagination and spiritual practices now received from her spouse, Veer, part of his own sufferings when he left this life to be reincarnated in another.

Further, Indira now believes herself and her own sufferings to be partly “fused” with those of Veer in such a way that Indira is no longer just the unique, individual person she remains. She is now also the social self and plural subject that she has largely chosen to become. As a singular individual, Indira continues to remain identical with herself all along. But as a plural indi-

vidual as well, Indira has come to share an importantly central part of her person with Veer.⁷² How so?

Indira's habitual spiritual exercises over the years have made her a person in a new, and different, sense than previously. Whereas some years ago Indira was certainly a person in being religiously and socially at home wholly in her Hindu culture, she is now a person in being spiritually and culturally at home not just wholly in her Hindu culture.

After the death of Veer and after refusing *suttee*, Indira first composed herself with respect to her Hinduism, one of whose central fundamentalist beliefs she continues to contravene. She refused *suttee*.

Her family, her friends, and her colleagues considered her no longer to be a "faithful wife." They tried to shame her deeply, and, in fact, she was deeply ashamed.

Then she recomposed herself. While continuing to hold her religious beliefs sincerely, she recomposed her self in restricted ways. She recomposed herself with respect to how her spiritual exercises had enabled her to assume her sufferings in remembering and imagining Veer.

By now being a person in this new way, Indira exhibits a new kind of behaviour that enables her reasonably to assume the sufferings of her own life as a pilgrim widow in Vrindavan and perhaps also Veer's sufferings and those of others in Veer's world.

She continues to believe sincerely, while knowing all along she may be mistaken in such transcendent and not fully rational matters, that, in Veer's world, Veer himself and very many others like him still wait on reincarnation.

She does not know whether her continuing to survive Veer in her present widowed state as but half a person, indeed as perhaps an unfaithful wife, is strongly linked with his and

⁷² On the notions of "fusion" and "plural subjects" see M. Gilbert, "Group Wrongs and Guilt Feelings," *The Journal of Ethics* 1 (1997), 65-84. See also Katherine Hawley, "Fission, Fusion and Intrinsic Facts," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71 (2005), 602-621.

eventually her prospects for reincarnation. But, however restricted her composite identity may be as a person, she continues to practice her spiritual exercises as an essential means of remaining composed.

In short, Indira's person, she now tells me, is a "realization" of her fuller being. She says, "I am now a realisation of my fuller being." Could she be mistaken?

She believes she is now both an individual person graced with a unique personal identity, an avatar or individual "released soul in bodily form on earth," and a multiple person enjoying plural personal identities in different restricted compositions, an incarnation herself of some larger, spiritual reality governing obscurely the myriad ways of the world.

Envoi

Now, such apparently extravagant beliefs and practices raise any number of complex questions. Here I must conclude with but two.

The first question is particular. Can we make sufficient sense of talk about restricted composition to justify rationally some of our social and political commitments with Amartya Sen to the importance of understanding persons as holding no unique identities other than their shared identities? In short, is the idea of personal identity and not just social identity as pre-eminently shared identity philosophically viable?

And the second question is general. In the light of our widespread cross-cultural experiences at the global level, in these contexts what exactly is the philosophical problem of personal identity? In short, do our traditional strictly philosophical reflections on personal identity in terms of unity, continuity, relations, criteria, principles, and propositions still make sense enough today to capture some of these cross-cultural experiences, both respectfully and properly?⁷³

⁷³ In summary, I offer this extract from a recent exchange with my friend, Indira, one of my several, tactful but imaginary friends: "Since losing your