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Extreme Claim**

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## **An Attempt to Undermine the Extreme Claim**

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### **Abstract**

According to reductionism, personal identity consists in the continuity and connectedness between psychological and/or bodily states and not in a further fact. It's been argued that when reductionism is endorsed, one's concern for one's future, called the special concern, cannot be justified. Parfit (1984) calls this the extreme claim. The extreme claim is typically based on the view that continuity and connectedness are irrelevant to the special concern. My purpose is to undermine the extreme claim. I first argue against the stronger claim that the special concern is not compatible with reductionism. Secondly I argue that the continuity and connectedness between psychological and/or bodily states figure in the determination of a mental state as a mental state of a particular kind, e.g. as a state of concern rather than a belief or a desire. Therefore continuity and connectedness can be seen as relevant to the special concern. Thirdly I argue that some examples used in favor of the extreme claim assume psychological criterion of identity and that those examples fail to support the extreme claim when bodily criterion is endorsed. Lastly, I argue against the view that phenomenal consciousness cannot be made sense of when reductionism is endorsed.

**Keywords:** Personal Identity, Extreme Claim, Special Concern, Reductionism

## Introduction

According to Parfit (1984), personal identity consists in psychological continuity and/or connectedness, hence personal identity has to do with the way one's psychological states are related.<sup>1</sup> This is a reductionist view of personal identity since facts about personal identity ultimately reduce to facts about psychological or bodily states. The reductionist view stands in opposition to the non-reductionist view of personal identity according to which personal identity consists in a further fact and does not reduce to facts about mental or bodily states. It has been argued that the concern one has for one's future – which is called the special concern – cannot be justified if one endorses a reductionist view of personal identity.<sup>2</sup> Parfit (1984, p.307) refers to this as the extreme claim.

My purpose in this paper is to undermine the extreme claim. While the extreme claim has been refuted on the grounds that *concern* for one's future is not the kind of thing that would be implied, or can be justified by a metaphysical theory of identity, I am not interested in this particular type of refutation because the reasons involved are not specific to reductionism.<sup>3</sup> It is conceivable that a theory of what makes a person the same person in time has no further psychological implications. Hence it is not in this sense that reductionism, or non-reductionism for that matter, is expected to justify the special concern. The issue at hand is rather a criticism of the failure of reductionist accounts of personal identity to justify the special concern, granted that theories of identity have further psychological implications.

In an attempt to undermine the extreme claim it has also been argued that non-reductionists about personal identity aren't really better off than reductionists in grounding the special concern.<sup>4</sup> Such discussions appeal to the non-reductionists' negligence to articulate what the further fact is.<sup>5</sup> Without a doubt, the non-reductionist view would be much stronger with a well-articulated theory of what the further fact is;<sup>6</sup> however, the non-reductionist's

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<sup>1</sup>Parfit (1984, p.206) says that direct connections or at least one direct connection between psychological states, give rise to psychological connectedness, and overlapping chains of strong connectedness give rise to psychological continuity. Strong connectedness in turn is described quantitatively, i.e., in terms of there being "sufficiently many" direct connections.

<sup>2</sup>Such objections date back to Butler's objection to Locke's account. See Kind (2004) for a discussion. Also see Schechtman (1996), Langsam (2001), Whiting (1986), and Wolf (1986) for other discussions of how psychological continuity relates to the special concern.

<sup>3</sup>And they would not have been specific to non-reductionism either had the non-reductionist view been accused of failing to justify the special concern. See for instance Wolf (1986) for a discussion of why a theory of identity cannot be used to justify attitudes regarding one's identity. Also see Garrett (1991) for a discussion of how "theses about the *nature* of personal identity ... , and theses about the *importance* of personal identity ... are separately evaluable." (p.373)

<sup>4</sup>See Johansson (2007) and Langsam (2001) for a discussion.

<sup>5</sup>See Shoemaker (1985) for a criticism and also Langsam (2001) for an attempt at an articulation of the further fact.

<sup>6</sup>The further fact is usually taken to consist in the existence of some persisting entity, denoted as one's self, something like a Lockean consciousness or a Cartesian ego and without a well-

failure to provide such a theory is essentially not relevant to the metaphysical dispute between reductionists and non-reductionists about whether or not there needs to be a further fact – whatever it may be – to justify special concern. Hence I am not interested in this particular type of refutation either because it does not address the heart of the matter.

What is missing in the literature is an attempt to undermine the extreme claim by arguing that the reductionist account is capable of justifying the special concern. And that's what I intend to do.

Frequently the extreme claim, that is the claim that the special concern cannot be *justified* by a reductionist view, usually gets confounded with a much stronger claim that the reductionist view is not *compatible* with the special concern. Reasons for the extreme claim may thus be confounded with reasons for wrongly thinking that reductionism is not compatible with the special concern. So in the first part, I will address this issue and explain why reductionism is compatible with the special concern and not only with there being an explanation for the special concern.<sup>1</sup> This however is not meant to provide a justification of the special concern. Still, it is important to establish that reductionism and the special concern are compatible since any attempt to justify the special concern by the reductionist may be dispensed with before giving it any serious thought when the two are taken to be incompatible. Hence in the first part I address compatibility issues and in the second part, I attempt to provide a justification.

### Compatibility Issues

According to the reductionist, personal identity consists in the continuity and/or connectedness between psychological and/or bodily states in a non-branching manner such as the connectedness between a desire and an intention that is based on it, or a memory and the experience it is a memory of.<sup>2</sup> Why then would reductionism be incompatible with the special concern? The most immediate answer is that there is no place for an appropriate subject of concern

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articulated description of what this self is, there remains difficult possibilities such as the possibility of multiple non-reductionist selves throughout one's life. For related discussions see Strawson (1997, 2003) and also Rosenthal (2002, 2005). However, these issues are not immediately relevant to the extreme claim.

<sup>1</sup>This is another distinction; there is the claim that reductionism is compatible with the special concern and the claim that reductionism is compatible with there being an explanation for the special concern. The latter is a much weaker claim. For instance, according to Parfit (1984) our concern is explained, by the fact that we have beliefs that presuppose the false non-reductionist view. Clearly, this explanation for the special concern is compatible with reductionism but it doesn't do much favor for the reductionist view. Hence my initial interest is in the former claim, that reductionism is compatible with the special concern and then the more significant claim – and also the main purpose of this paper – that the reductionist view can justify the special concern.

<sup>2</sup>Parfitian reductionism is by far the most influential one and he uses a psychological criterion of identity. See Belzer (1996) for a discussion of an occasional ambiguity present in Parfit's use of psychological connectedness and psychological continuity.

in reductionist accounts of personal identity. In other words, reductionism accommodates the concern as a mental state and a stream of other mental states that are continuous with it, but not the thing that is concerned. Non-reductionism on the other hand, seems to give us a suitable subject of concern.

This particular rationale behind the extreme claim can be traced back to Sidgwick's criticism of Hume's bundle theory. Hume (1739-40/1978, p.252) sees nothing but a bundle of perceptions when he looks most intimately inside himself and a persisting unity that binds these perceptions is nowhere to be found, except perhaps in the imagination. And Sidgwick (1907, p.419) says that there is no reason why one element of a bundle would be concerned with another element of the same bundle any more than with another bundle.

The apparent need for something over and above mental states and the ways in which they are related, is what initially makes the non-reductionist view the tempting one with regards to the special concern, because like Reid (1785/2008, p.109), most people would think of themselves as not just a bundle of mental states but as the thing that has those mental states – the subject of experiences – and therefore rightly justified about their futures.<sup>1</sup>

While a suitable candidate of concern seems essential for the special concern, it is not really clear why the reductionist is by default taken to deny subjects of experiences. Parfit (1984, p.223) himself says that persons are what have experiences, therefore they are subjects and in that sense they are distinct from their bodies and experiences, but he adds that they are not thereby separately existing entities; that is, separate from their bodies and experiences. A reductionist might argue that the concept of an experience entails the concept of something that has the experience without saying anything further about what that something is. Experiences and subjects may be intrinsically related in our conceptual schemes, however metaphysically speaking this neither guarantees nor even strongly suggests the presence of a separately existing subject.<sup>2</sup> Strawson (2003, p. 280) for instance says that whenever there is an experience, there is a subject of experience and calls this *the subject thesis*, but he also adds that no inference about the nature of the subject can be made from the *subject thesis*, not even an inference that the subject is ontologically distinct from the experience. (p.293)

Reductionists may agree without contradiction that an experience exists only if someone has it, e.g. that there'd be no pain unless someone has it. It is just that their account of the fact 'someone has it' differs from the non-reductionist's. Within reductionism, subjects, void of ontological significance, may be accommodated as a consequence of what we understand from experiences. And if one needed a description of what subjecthood consists in, it

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<sup>1</sup>See Schechtman (1996) for a discussion of related issues. She suggests four basic features of personal existence arising from the importance of identity, which are survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and compensation and argues that the importance of identity cannot be captured by reductionist identity theorists.

<sup>2</sup>For instance, mothers are distinct from women in that they have kids, but they're not thereby separately existing since facts about a mother reduce to further facts about the woman that she is.

may be suggested that being a subject is nothing more than the healthy functioning of some underlying mechanism that allows the emergence of mental states e.g. the functioning of a well-developed nervous system.<sup>1</sup> According to this view, the emergence of a mental state strictly speaking would be a process rather than an ability or a property of a thing.

So what does this mean with regards to the extreme claim? It means that the reductionist can endorse subjects of experiences, hence appropriate candidates of concern. This would make reductionism compatible with the special concern and then the reductionist has a chance to see if she can further justify the special concern. One way to do that is by showing the significance of psychological continuity and/or connectedness, which I will refer to as CC from now on, for the special concern.<sup>2</sup> And this is what I attempt to do in the next part.

### **Reductionist Justification**

The special concern as a mental state has an intentional character; it is always about something. We're not just concerned, we're concerned about something.<sup>3</sup> The content of a mental state of concern is significant to the extreme claim for reasons that I discuss below and I contend that CC between perhaps not all but some experiences figures in the intentional and the qualitative characteristics of mental states, which in turn determines those mental states as states of concern rather than say as desires or beliefs.

According to Langsam (2001, p.250), my worry concerning a dentist appointment can't be based on the fact that the person who will be sitting in the dentist's chair tomorrow has the same childhood memories as the ones that I have. While this may sound reasonable at first, there are other considerations that may make CC between perhaps not childhood memories but between other memories, beliefs, dispositions etc. and one's current psychological states significant for the concern about the dentist visit, e.g. CC between my prior experiences at the dentist. Whether or not I have been to a dentist, the number of times I have been to a dentist, the stories I have heard from other people about their dentist visits undoubtedly play a role in whether or not there would be a mental state of concern and the intensity of the concern about my future dentist visit.

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<sup>1</sup>See Damasio (1999) for related issues and the processes involved in an organism's representation of itself as itself, which is essential to forming the concept of oneself.

<sup>2</sup>There are two reasons why I don't use Parfit's phrase *Relation R*. The first is due to Belzer's (1996) discussion of the ambiguity present in Parfit's use. The second is that, strictly speaking a reductionist does not have to commit to a psychological or a bodily criterion. Since Parfitian reductionism is by far the most influential one, most of the discussion that follows is on *psychological* continuity and/or connectedness, however I intend CC to remain neutral.

<sup>3</sup>Surely there are cases when one has a disposition of being concerned or rather agitated without knowing what he is concerned about, but that is not the kind of concern implied by the extreme claim. One is concerned about one's health, financial resources, concerned about how the appointment with the dentist will go etc.

My prior experiences regarding dentist visits also figure in the way my special concern is related to my other mental states such as my unwillingness to go. What makes a mental state the mental state of a particular type such as a belief as opposed to say a desire is partly determined by the particular content of the mental state and how that particular mental state relates to other mental states. If I have never been to a dentist before, I am likely to be less worried compared to a person who's been to the dentist before. Or maybe I will be more worried because of fear caused by not knowing. Either way, the particular nature of my mental state and how it relates to other mental states is influenced by prior relevant experiences. So, even though when certain experiences such as childhood memories are considered in isolation, they seem irrelevant to the concern, other experiences aren't, especially those that involve dentist visits. Hence CC between prior dentist visits and present expectation of the future dentist appointment, becomes significant since it partly determines the mental state about the future dentist visit as a mental state of *concern*, as opposed to say merely a *belief* that I'll go to the dentist tomorrow.

The defenders of the extreme claim seem to focus on those psychological states that seem irrelevant to the concern like childhood memories and infer that CC between psychological states in general is irrelevant. But this inference is untenable and it is a way of throwing away the baby with the bathwater.<sup>1</sup>

Still one might wonder whether an appeal to CC for identifying a mental state as a state of concern is the same as providing a *reductionist* justification of the concern. The criticism would be that the claim that such CC is what personal identity consists in does not seem to do any explanatory work for the justification of the special concern. In addition, one might agree that CC is indeed relevant to the special concern in the sense discussed above but also add that the non-reductionist does not need to deny this.

Firstly, granted that the significance of CC for the special concern is accepted, I don't think that the non-reductionist's endorsement of CC weakens the reductionist's account of the special concern. Whether or not she endorses the influence of CC on mental states, the non-reductionist says something further. She says that facts about personal identity do not reduce to facts about mental or bodily events; personal identity consists in a further fact. The discussion above consists of how a mental state becomes a state of concern and not e.g. a belief in virtue of the CC between some mental states. And since the reductionist says that personal identity consists in such connectedness and resulting continuities between mental or bodily events and nothing further, the articulation of how a mental state becomes a state of concern in the absence of

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<sup>1</sup>One may argue here that CC matters for the concern only insofar as the person can remember the experiences between which the CC holds. However I do not intend the significance of CC for content to rely on the subject's awareness of the CC, nor for that matter on the kind of narrative outlook that Schechtman (1996) argues for as a condition of personal identity. It is perfectly conceivable that a frightful childhood experience with fierce dogs may be the reason for my fear of dogs as an adult even if I have absolutely no recollection of the incident whatsoever.



a further fact naturally becomes the *reductionist's* justification of the concern or at least an essential part of it.

There is further support for the significance of CC for the special concern from what seems at first an unrelated criticism of psychological theories of identity. Campbell (2004, p.263) argues that psychological theorists of identity should include a clause about the rapidity of changes in psychology in their analysis to the effect that “identity requires that there must not be too many psychological changes in too short a time.” He explains that even though psychological theorists take *A* to be destroyed when psychological states of *A* are wiped off and replaced by *B's* psychological states, if this transfer were gradual, the psychological theorist of identity would have to accept that *A* survives and *B* is the same person as *A*. He says that over a period of 100 seconds if *A's* psychology was replaced bit by bit such that after one second 1% of *A's* psychology is changed and after two seconds 2% of her psychology is changed and so on and so forth, then the person after one second – call it *A<sub>1</sub>* – would be strongly psychologically connected to *A*, hence the same person as *A*. Likewise the person after two seconds – call it *A<sub>2</sub>* – would be strongly psychologically connected to *A<sub>1</sub>*, hence the same person as *A<sub>1</sub>* and by transitivity the same person as *A*. Consequently, since *A<sub>99</sub>* would be the same person as *B* and by transitivity the same person as *A*, *A* would be the same person as *B* and Campbell says that no psychological theorist would want to accept that.

However, even though an 8-year-old hardly shares any of her psychology with the 65-year-old that she becomes, we have no difficulty accepting them as the same person since the change from the 8-year-old to the 65-year-old is gradual enough to give rise to numerous overlapping chains of connectedness that readily establish the CC that personal identity consists in, between the 8-year-old and the 65-year-old. Yet, Campbell (2004, p.258) argues that no psychological theorist would want to accept that the same person continues to exist if an 8-year-old is given the psychology of a 65-year-old in 100 seconds. This shows that a criterion regarding the rapidity of changes in psychology should be included in one's analysis of personal identity.

Then Campbell gives a more detailed account of why a person cannot survive rapid changes. He says (p.260):

We all lose memories over the years and our intentions and personality traits change, and so on. What we want to be the case, though, is that for the most part these memories, intentions and personality traits, etc., manage to interact with some other memories, intentions and traits that persist after the former disappear, so that the latter are influenced by the former, and the way they are because of this influence. And even if the latter states disappear themselves later on, we want it to be the case, for the most part, that they also interacted with some other memories, intentions and traits, etc., that persisted longer than they did. That is, we like there to be, for the most part, a reasonable amount of ‘overlap’ between our earlier and

later psychological states, so that our later states ‘grow out of’ the earlier states.

In the case of rapid changes Campbell (2004, p.260) says that the “overlap occurs so quickly that the earlier states had no chance to interact in normal life situations with the later states, and the later states were in no way influenced by the former.” The kind of interaction and influence that Campbell says is required for identity is of the kind that I suggest brings about the occurrence of a mental state as a mental state of a particular kind, e.g. a concern rather than a belief. And this is what justifies the special concern since as a consequence of interactions and resulting influences, there arises a concern about e.g. a dentist appointment tomorrow and not just a belief that I have a dentist appointment tomorrow. Hence one can say that insofar as personal identity consists in the CC that result from such interactions and influences, the justification of the special concern argued for above is a reductionist’s justification.

It may be argued that the account I’ve given is too broad and not particularly about concerns let alone the special concern, that is the concern one has for oneself. The criticism would be that the same explanation could be given for the occurrence of beliefs, or desires, or concerns for others or concern for oneself, while the extreme claim is specifically about one’s concern for oneself.

I’m not however sure why it would be a weakness of my account that it can be used for other mental states as well insofar as the interactions and the resulting influences are taken to uniquely determine mental states as mental states of a particular kind. Surely an articulation of why under certain circumstances, a belief arises and under other circumstances a concern does would greatly improve my account and help reductionists in their overall agenda but I can’t take up such issues here. To that end my account can be seen as merely pointing in the right direction.

Nevertheless there is another argument for the irrelevance of continuity. Suppose that you are told that you will be tortured tomorrow after ensuring that the person at the time of the torture is not going to be psychologically continuous with the person you are now. Would you still be concerned about the torture? The answer is an immediate yes and understandably so because all that seems to matter is that you will feel the pain.<sup>1</sup> Hence psychological continuity seems irrelevant for the concern.

Suppose further that all your memories, desires, beliefs, intentions etc. are transferred to another body and this time you’re told that it is the body that will host your psychological states that will be tortured. Apart from the concern about losing memories and the rest, you’re likely to feel relieved since you will

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<sup>1</sup>Although some qualification is still needed. One’s concept of torture and pain should remain intact to justify the concern. Now whether or not some psychological continuity is needed for those concepts to remain intact is a question that I cannot address here. It is obvious that in the case of memory loss, one does not thereby lose one’s sense of what pain is. However the hypothetical case of the wiping off of psychological continuity is different from a mere memory loss.

not feel the pain. In this case special concern for the person you are psychologically continuous with is missing. Again psychological continuity seems irrelevant.

Although in the light of the examples mentioned above psychological continuity seems irrelevant to the special concern, bodily continuity isn't. In the second example you are not concerned about the torture since the body that will be tortured is numerically distinct from your body. In the first example, you are concerned for the body that is continuous with your own.

The torture examples above and other similar examples in the literature are used to show that the special concern is not justified when reductionism is endorsed because psychological continuity is not relevant to the concern. A reductionist theory of identity however does not have to be cast in terms of psychological continuity although undoubtedly Parfit's theory of identity is, and his theory is by far the most influential reductionist identity theory. But the main idea behind a reductionist theory is the claim that facts about personal identity reduce to facts about other things. Now whether those facts are about bodily states or psychological states is not what determines a theory of identity as a reductionist theory of identity.<sup>1</sup> However it seems that the counter examples used in support of the extreme claim assume that psychological continuity is what personal identity consists in according to reductionism even though bodily continuity is a perfectly good candidate too. In fact if a reductionist about personal identity defends the view that personal identity consists in bodily continuity, such counterexamples discussed above cannot be used in support of the extreme claim.

Langsam (2001), in arguing that one's concern about the dentist appointment cannot be due to the connection between various psychological states such as the sharing of childhood memories, is aware that this criticism applies only to those reductionists that take psychological continuity as the criterion of identity. He goes on to say "Presumably my special concern about my future pain is equally indifferent to the fact that there are neural states contemporaneous with this experience of pain that stand in relations of physical continuity with my present neural states. So an advocate of a Reductionist "physical" criterion of personal identity will be equally unsuccessful in justifying attitudes of special concern for one's own future pains." (p.250) This remark is too swift. It is precisely because of the physical continuity that holds in the first torture case and does not in the second torture case that one would be concerned in the first one and not in the latter.

On a more important note, Langsam says that one would be concerned about a dentist appointment mainly because one would feel pain. He argues that for the mental state of pain to have phenomenal consciousness and thereby hurt, there needs to be a subject of the pain. The consciousness of the pain cannot be accounted for in terms of the psychological continuity the mental state of pain takes part in. Instead it requires a subject for whom there will be

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<sup>1</sup>Parfit (1984, p.241) also says that reductionists should not try to decide between the different criteria of personal identity.

something like to have the pain.<sup>1</sup> The subject – or in his terms the self – is an explanatory posit in our folk psychological theory of consciousness and helps us make sense of the phenomenon of consciousness, phenomenal consciousness in particular. And since the special concern about pain is justified only if the pain hurts, in other words only if the pain is conscious, whatever accounts for the consciousness of the pain is essential to the justification of the special concern. According to Langsam, the self is an indispensable part of this account and without the self as the further fact the special concern cannot be justified.

It is not clear however why the need for a subject is equated with the need for a further fact. As discussed in part I, a reductionist may agree without contradiction that subjects or selves are indispensable as a result of what we understand from experiences, or conscious mental states.<sup>2</sup> However subjects in this sense do not need to be accepted as distinct entities that constitute the non-reductionist's further fact. As mentioned before, it is conceivable that subjecthood is something that arises once a certain level of complexity within the biological organization of an organism is achieved. In other words, the self would not be a thing that feels pain, but a conceptual artifact that makes it easier for us to talk about pains that hurt once such a level of representation of mental states is established.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Langsam's emphasis on consciousness is nevertheless well placed and offers a very important insight. Surely the mere occurrence of a mental state of pain does not justify one's concern. The pain needs to be conscious. Although unstated, it is obvious that one's concern for either the dentist appointment or the torture involves pains that have not yet been instantiated. Hence a person in having a special concern in these examples of torture or dentist appointment relies on what he already knows about pains based on past pain experiences.<sup>3</sup> It is essential to the justification of the special concern that these pain experiences, the conscious mental state of the concern and the anticipated pain all partake in the same stream of consciousness. To that end, CC, in its one form or another, viz., bodily or psychologically or perhaps both, can be

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<sup>1</sup>Langsam (2001, p.259) says that the intrinsic feel of a pain is a conscious feature of that pain, and therefore it can only be instantiated with respect to a self. The self thereby not only has the pain, but it also feels it.

<sup>2</sup>Experiences are in this sense conscious mental states. Hence in my usage of the term experience, qualifying an experience as a conscious experience is redundant. There is however a different approach that takes experiences as mental states in general in which case the phrase 'conscious experience' is not redundant. See Bryne (2004) for a discussion. Within the context of this paper, the distinction is merely a difference in terminology and does not represent a philosophical dispute.

<sup>3</sup>Again, when I say pain experiences, I mean conscious mental states of pain.

conceived as a way of ensuring the singularity of the relevant stream<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, CC between all kinds of mental states such as childhood memories that may at first seem irrelevant to the special concern about e.g. a dentist appointment becomes an epistemologically necessary resource to pin down the relevant stream of consciousness.

In order to justify the special concern in a non-reductionist spirit one could say that the anticipated pain, past pain experiences and the conscious mental state of concern are mental states that belong to the same subject. The subject would be the further fact and the thing that allows the relevant mental states to be uniquely grouped together. I am not saying that a non-reductionist justification of the special concern is impossible. The main purpose of this paper was to undermine the extreme claim that if reductionism is endorsed, the special concern cannot be justified. Reductionism is the view that personal identity consists in CC between psychological and/or physical states and nothing further. And I tried to show how CC alone justifies the special concern. Besides, there are no mysterious substantial objects suggested by the reductionist, which is of further merit for anyone who is concerned with Occam's razor and is not happy with a jangled ontology.

Without a doubt if the kind of connectedness that constitutes the continuity that further constitutes the identity is more thoroughly articulated, the case for a reductionist justification of the special concern would be much stronger. But at least one could say that there is far more work done on the articulation of the CC compared to the articulation of the non-reductionist's further fact.

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<sup>1</sup>It is important to not to include psychological states of different people in one bundle no matter how related they may be. See Korsgaard (1989, p.107) and also Sorabji (2006, p.272) for a discussion.

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