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IN DEFENCE OF REINCARNATION

In 'Reincarnation and Relativized Identity'[1] J. J. MacIntosh argues that reincarnation is impossible. I wish to make a slightly backhanded defence of reincarnation by showing that MacIntosh's argument does not succeed. I do not follow his recipe for defence of reincarnation exactly:

> ... there is nothing more to the argument for the possibility of reincarnation: it involves suggesting that the thing is possible on the face of it – that there could be evidence sufficient to establish identity – and then meeting, or trying to meet, whatever objections may be produced.[2]

I cannot accept that epistemological concerns, e.g. evidence and establishing, have to do with a thing's possibility. The only reason *I* have for thinking reincarnation possible is that millions of people think it to be contingently true that it happens. When a philosopher argues to the necessary falsehood of what millions of people take to be contingently true, it suggests to me that the philosopher is not thinking about the same thing they are. However this may be, from here on I limit myself to the task of meeting MacIntosh's objections to the possibility of reincarnation.

Let me start with our common ground. The following *are* theorems of first-order logic with identity and necessity. They are true too:

$$a = b \supset \Box \, (a = b) \qquad\qquad (1)$$
$$\Diamond \, (a \neq b) \supset a \neq b. \qquad\qquad (2)$$

It is in the discussion that follows the proofs of (1) and (2) in the text that we begin to part company:

> If it is possible for the human being we used to call Charles to wake up one morning and begin behaving in all relevant respects Guy Fawkesily (and it is), then, equally, it is possible for the human being we used to call Robert to wake up one morning (the same morning, come to that), and begin behaving the same way. We may suppose moreover – it is, after all, our story – that Guy Fawkes/Charles and Guy Fawkes/Robert are *not* the same person: a whisper in the ear of Guy Fawkes/Charles awakens no complicitous twinkle in the eye of Guy Fawkes/Robert. But then, clearly, we have a problem. For we have no more reason to identify Guy Fawkes/Charles with Guy Fawkes than we have to identify Guy Fawkes/Robert with him. So we must either identify *both* with Guy Fawkes, or neither: but we cannot identify *both*, for identity is both symmetric and transitive. So we cannot identify either Charles or Robert with Guy Fawkes.[3]

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[1] *Rel. Stud.* xxv, 153–65. [2] *Ibid.* 155. [3] *Ibid.* 158.

This is clear up to the first 'So'. But why should we be limited to the two options: judging that *both* are Guy Fawkes, or judging that neither is? Personally, because the evidence is the way it is (the case was constructed to be that way), I would opt to suspend judgement. So far as I can tell, it's impossible to determine who, if either, is Fawkes. But from the limitations of my and other people's abilities to propose tests which will provide evidence to allow us to tell who is Fawkes, it certainly does not follow that neither is Fawkes.

To this MacIntosh responds, 'To insist, when there is no conceivable further evidence that could affect the case, and when both supply the evidence which is supposedly sufficient to establish identity, that one of them might *really* be Guy Fawkes, while the other one *really* is not, is to let the word "really" lose its grip on reality'.[4] Here, once more, we have the move from epistemology, such words as 'evidence' and 'establish', to the ontological, '*really* be'. Behind this slide from epistemology to ontology seem to lurk two (very dubious) assumptions:

(A) Given two incompatible situations P and Q, if there is no conclusive test which permits us (humans) to tell whether P or whether Q, it is impossible to know that P (and ditto Q). If there is no test which permits me to tell whether I'm awake or whether I'm dreaming, it is impossible for me to know that I'm awake.

(B) Given two incompatible situations P and Q, if it is impossible for us to know that P and impossible for us to know that Q, then $\sim P$ and $\sim Q$. Since I believe it possible for me to know I'm awake, I conclude that (A) is false. I do agree: any test that one can propose, one can dream one's applying and getting the result that one's awake. Despite that fact I still think I can know I'm awake. Knowledge that p doesn't imply the ability to test or to verify whether p.

Nor does (B) look convincing to me. Why should our inability to know whether Charles or Robert is Guy Fawkes *imply* that neither is? Furthermore, I fail to see why, if there were no Robert, we couldn't *know* Charles to be Fawkes. Certainly the *mere possibility* that somewhere in the universe there exists a Guy Fawkes-like candidate does not prevent us from knowing Charles to be Fawkes. If, on an analysis of knowledge, the *possibility* of counterevidence, of mistake or even non-knowledge implied non-knowledge, that, to my mind, would constitute a reductio of the analysis. But knowledge that Charles is Fawkes *may* carry the implication that Fawkes-like candidate Robert does not *in fact* exist anywhere.

Here MacIntosh cites Wiggins 'who points out that this would commit us, implausibly, to the view that an identity claim was a claim of "unlimited generality about the whole universe, viz. that there was no competitor *anywhere* to be found"'.[5] Again there is confusion between the epistemic and

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[4] *Ibid.* 159.   [5] *Ibid.* 159–60.

the ontological. From the assumption that *I know* Charles to be Fawkes, it probably does follow that nowhere in the universe is there a, for me, indistinguishable Fawkes/Robert candidate. But from the mere assumption that Charles is Fawkes, it certainly does not follow that no such candidate exists.

In another way, though, I agree with the conclusion Wiggins draws, save for the implausibility assessment. Just as (1) and (2) are theorems of first-order logic with identity and necessity, the following is a theorem of second-order logic with a full comprehension axiom and identity as primitive:

$$a = b \equiv (\forall F)\,(Fa \equiv Fb). \tag{3}$$

Indeed, a primitive sign for identity is not really needed in second-order logic, since identity can be defined in it:

$$\text{`}a = b\text{'} =_{df} \text{`}(\forall F)\,(Fa \equiv Fb)\text{'}. \tag{4}$$

Now if Istanbul happens to be so-and-so many light years from the nearest planet in the universe on which there is intelligent bipedal life, then Constantinople is that many light years away from it too. *Any* property Istanbul has, Constantinople has. When we claim to know Istanbul to be Constantinople, that's one consequence we are indeed committed to. Identity claims are indeed 'unlimited generalizations about' the whole universe.

In closing, let me use an argument like MacIntosh's to call into question the idea that bodily continuity provides evidence of personal identity. It doesn't because we can never tell when we have observed it.

If you have ever been to New York City, you have seen a man do the three-card shuffle on a quickly foldable table, taking bets that those who stop to watch can't follow the Ace of Spades as he moves the cards from one position to another. Suppose now we are watching a Super-Magician do the two-card shuffle. No matter how intently we try to follow the bodily continuity of the card He put down first, we are *so* inept, and He is *so* nimble and gifted that we never get to verify at the end of the shuffle which card is the card He put down first at the beginning. If it is possible for the leftmost card to end up behaving in all relevant respects, all the ones we can discern, like the card the Magician first put down (and it is), then, equally, it is possible for the rightmost card to do the same (in the same shuffle). The leftmost card and the rightmost card are *not* the same card. But then, clearly, we have a problem. For we have no more reason to identify the leftmost card with the one put down first than we have to identify the rightmost card with the one put down first. So we must either identify both with the one put down first, or neither: but we cannot identify *both*, for identity is both symmetric and transitive. So we cannot identify either the leftmost card or the rightmost card with the one put down first.

Or maybe the Magician shuffles *us* from one body in one location to another in another location as He alternately works His trick in each location.[6]

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