

6

“I’M SHARON, BUT I’M A DIFFERENT SHARON”: THE IDENTITY OF CYLONS

Amy Kind

The question of personal identity—what makes a person the same person over time—is puzzling. Through the course of a life, someone might undergo a dramatic alteration in personality, radically change her values, lose almost all of her memories, and undergo significant changes in her physical appearance. Given all of these potential changes, why should we be inclined to regard her as the *same person*? *Battlestar Galactica* presents us with an even bigger puzzle: What makes a Cylon the same Cylon over time? There are only twelve different models, but there are many copies of each. So what makes the resurrected Caprica Six the same Cylon as the one who seduced Gaius Baltar into betraying humanity, and yet a different Cylon from the tortured Gina or Shelly Godfrey?

Philosophers grappling with the nature of personal identity tend to fall into two groups. Both try to explain personal identity as a kind of continuity over time, but they split over what kind of continuity matters: *psychological* or *physical*.¹ What makes a Cylon the same Cylon over time, however, must be psychologically based. Unlike humans, Cylons have a special ability: they can resurrect.² Caprica Six tells Baltar: “I can’t die. When this body is destroyed, my memory, my consciousness, will be transmitted to a new one. I’ll just wake up somewhere else in an identical body” (“Miniseries”).

But a psychological theory of Cylon identity is threatened by the Number Eights, in particular, by Sharon “Boomer” Valerii and Sharon “Athena” Agathon. Boomer and Athena look exactly alike; as Helo

The Identity of Cylons

notes, they share the “same grin, same laugh, all the little things” (“Valley of Darkness”). But they have different personalities. Just think of how differently each of them relates to Hera: one will go to any lengths to save her, the other threatens to snap her neck (“Rapture”). In these respects, they seem a lot like clones or identical twins. But matters aren’t so simple, for unlike clones or identical twins, Athena shares many of Boomer’s memories, and her love for Helo is in many ways shaped by Boomer’s experiences with him. When Athena first joins up with the *Galactica* crew, she tells Helo how happy she feels:

Athena: Just being with you and Kara feels like I’ve come home. It’s like I’m back in the fleet.

Helo: But you were never in the fleet. That was the other Sharon.

Athena: I know. I know that. But I remember all of it. Like getting my wings. My first trip aboard the *Galactica*. You know, the memory of being in a uniform is so strong, so potent, it’s like, “I’m Sharon Valerii and this is my family.” That’s pretty weird, huh?
 (“Home, Part 2”)

“Pretty weird”—what an understatement! Talking later with Adama, who—having been recently shot by Boomer—isn’t sure what to make of her, she tells him, “I’m Sharon, but I’m a different Sharon.” How can that be?

“We Must Survive, and We Will Survive”—But How?

What it means to say that one person is identical to another depends on what we mean by *identity*—or, as a former President (of the United States, not the Twelve Colonies) once said, on what the meaning of the word “is” is. The sense in which identical twins are identical should be distinguished from the sense in which the inside source for Chief Tyrol’s New Caprica Resistance and the tactical officer on *Galactica* are identical. Identical twins are two distinct individuals, but they share all their physical qualities. They’re *qualitatively*, but not *numerically*, identical. The second sense of identity doesn’t involve two distinct individuals; Tyrol’s source and the *Galactica*’s tactical officer are one and the same man: Felix Gaeta. Our concern here is with numerical identity.

Amy Kind

The psychological theory of personal identity originates with John Locke (1632–1704). For Locke, 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.”³ This definition suggests that personal identity consists in an individual’s consciousness: “As far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then” (335). Locke’s notion of consciousness is usually understood in terms of *memory*. What it means for someone’s consciousness to extend backwards to one of his past actions is for him to *remember* it.

Memories come in several different sorts. Anyone from Gemenon probably remembers the first line of the Sacred Scrolls: “Life here began out there.” If you’re not from Gemenon, you may remember that the original *BSG* series’ prologue opens with these words. These are *factual* memories. In contrast, Starbuck remembers how to play pyramid when she goes up against Anders, even though she hasn’t played for quite a while due to her blown knee. She has a *skill* memory. Finally, Colonel Tigh remembers the horror of having his eye ripped out while being kept in detention on New Caprica. This is an *experiential* memory, also known as a *first-person* memory or a memory *from the inside*. This last kind is what Locke has in mind. Only I can remember, from the inside, my own experiences. Thus, on Locke’s view, if someone at a later time has an experiential memory of something that I did at an earlier time, then that someone must be me.

The intuition behind the view is simple. Suppose Admiral Adama and one of the tylium refinery workers could somehow swap bodies, so that one day the body of the refinery worker has all the memories of being the admiral and the body of the admiral has all the memories of being the refinery worker. According to Locke, this transfer favors the refinery worker (340). Since personal identity is determined by consciousness, the refinery worker (in the admiral’s body) is now lucky enough to be sleeping in Adama’s comfortable private quarters, with his voluminous library and ready-to-eat noodles, while the admiral (in the worker’s body) is forced to do the dangerous and dirty job of refining tylium to refuel the Vipers and Raptors he previously commanded.

Contemporary versions of the psychological theory further refine Locke’s notion of experiential memory and often factor in additional psychological connections beyond memory, such as intentions for the

The Identity of Cylons

future, preferences, and other character traits.⁴ But the basic idea's the same. What makes the admiral who rescued the Colonists from the Cylon occupation of New Caprica the same person as the commander who sent a stealth ship over the Armistice Line, and the same person as the Viper pilot called "Husker," is the psychological continuity that unites them. Thus, the man who rejoices in his victory at New Caprica can feel nostalgia when he sees his old Mark II Viper and feel guilt over having possibly provoked the Cylons into attacking the Colonies ("Exodus, Part 2"; "Miniseries"; "Hero").

Those who hold the physical theory of personal identity would disagree. The Viper pilot, the commander, and the admiral have the same body, the same brain. And it's this physical continuity that makes all three the same person. After Boomer shoots Adama, he languishes in a coma for over a week. There's no psychological continuity between the man in CIC reaching out to shake Boomer's hand and the man lying unconscious in *Galactica's* infirmary, but everyone still identifies that unconscious man as Adama. As Tigh insists, *Galactica* is still Adama's command ("Scattered"). In arguing for their view, physical continuity theorists like Bernard Williams often attack the coherence of the body transfer scenarios employed by their opponents. According to Williams, an individual's personality can't be separated from his bodily traits, making the whole notion of swapping bodies problematic. Certain faces can't embody arrogance or suspiciousness; certain voices can't sound sophisticated or authoritative.⁵ Try to imagine Adama's gruff voice issuing Baltar's self-serving and stammering excuses, or Baltar's pleading eyes delivering Adama's steely stare.

One advantage of the physical continuity theory is its simplicity. On the psychological continuity theory, questions could always arise about whether an individual really shares another's memories, or just seems to—imagine someone who claims to remember his defeat at Waterloo and thereby to be Napoleon. In contrast, if sameness of body establishes sameness of person, then determining personal identity would be straightforward. But critics charge that the physical continuity view doesn't do justice to our intuitions about ourselves. How could someone who has none of my memories or personality traits be *me*, even if she has my body? And if, somehow, my memory and personality could be transferred into another body, how could that fail to be me? President Roslin, feeling the effects of her cancer, jokingly asks Adama if he can get her "a new body. Perhaps one of

Amy Kind

those young Cylon models” (“Resurrection Ship, Part 1”). Having the particular body that she does isn’t crucial to her identity, and if she can trade up, all the better. For this reason, although neither view of personal identity is immune to objection, the psychological view is generally more popular among contemporary philosophers. But what view should we take towards Cylon identity?

“Death Becomes a Learning Experience”

BSG’s depiction of the different copies of the same Cylon model is generally neutral between the physical and psychological theories. Different copies of the same model are numerically different Cylons. But this is compatible with both theories, since different copies share neither physical nor psychological continuity. The Brother Cavil to whom we’re introduced on *Galactica*, counseling Tyrol after his assault on Cally, looks just like the Cavil who suddenly appears on Caprica among the resistance fighters (“Lay Down Your Burdens”). But these two Cavils clearly have numerically distinct bodies—as shown when they sit side by side in *Galactica*’s brig—and numerically distinct minds as well—as evidenced by the second Cavil’s surprise at learning his counterpart has been found out as a “frakking Cylon.”

There’s no question, however, that Cylon resurrection depends on some kind of psychological continuity theory. On the physical theory, a Cylon’s bodily death would entail the end of his existence, and this is flatly incompatible with the process of resurrection. When a Cylon undergoes bodily death, his “consciousness” is transferred to a new, qualitatively identical body, and he—*the very same Cylon*—is thereby resurrected. Even Cylon Raiders can resurrect and retain their experience, knowledge, and skills (“Scar”). Cylon “skin jobs” also remember their past experiences of bodily death and resurrection. Cavil describes his first resurrection as having left him with only a headache; the third, he says, feels “like a frakkin’ white, hot poker” through his skull (“Exodus, Part 1”).

Suppose that Roslin’s cancer were to spread to her brain, and Doc Cottle advises that the only way she could possibly survive would be through an experimental brain surgery that would radically and irreversibly change her psychological makeup and capabilities.⁶ Faced with this prospect, she might naturally wonder whether this result

The Identity of Cylons

would really be *survival*. After the surgery, even if it's completely successful at eradicating the cancer, will she still be the same person or someone else with her name and body? In contrast, a Cylon facing resurrection doesn't have this kind of worry. He may worry that there's not a resurrection ship nearby, but he's not at all concerned about whether the resurrected Cylon will be *him*.

When one of the Number Threes repeatedly commits suicide, she does so fully secure in the knowledge that it's only bodily suicide. Her consciousness will be downloaded into a new body, and thus she will still exist ("Hero"). When Leoben imprisons Starbuck during the Cylon occupation of New Caprica, she kills him numerous times, but through repeated resurrection he keeps coming back ("Occupation"). After she kills him for the fifth time, he taunts her, "I'll see you soon." And when Athena and Helo discover that their daughter, Hera, is still alive and in Cylon hands, Athena talks Helo into shooting her so she can resurrect on the Cylon basestar and retrieve Hera ("Rapture"). When a Number Eight returns to *Galactica* with Hera in her arms, there's no question that she's Athena. The Cylons never doubt that there can be survival through bodily death and resurrection; for them, survival requires psychological, not physical, continuity.

"I Am Sharon and That's Part of What You Need to Understand"

This understanding of Cylon identity, however, is called into question by examining Boomer and Athena more closely. When Athena returns from Caprica with Helo, everyone aboard *Galactica* responds to her as if she's Boomer, the Sharon they all knew—or thought they knew. But the distinction between these two Number Eights is critically important for Athena, for she doesn't want to be held responsible for Boomer's actions—particularly for shooting Adama. When Apollo first sees Athena, he becomes immediately enraged and puts a gun to her head. She later confronts him:

Athena: I know how you feel, I get it. But I didn't shoot him, okay?

It wasn't me.

Apollo: You're all the same.

Athena: You don't know what the hell you're talking about.

("Home, Part 1")

Amy Kind

And she's right—the Number Eights aren't all the same. Boomer and Athena have different personalities. Certainly, they have different goals. Athena, for example, clearly has maternal instincts Boomer doesn't share. Even Hera responds to them differently, which astonishes Caprica Six: "Look at that. Hera knows her. That's amazing!" ("Rapture"). Moreover, they're not co-conscious—Athena, on *Galactica*, can't know what Boomer is thinking or doing on the basestar. For these reasons, the psychological theory should treat them as different individuals. But once again, matters aren't so simple.

While Athena can't know what Boomer is *presently* thinking, she does share many of Boomer's distinctive memories—although it doesn't seem that Boomer shares any of Athena's memories. But Athena doesn't share *all* of Boomer's memories. Athena doesn't remember having shot Adama or being shot by Cally ("Home, Part 2").⁷ But when Helo asks Athena whether she remembers her relationship with Tyrol, she admits that she does ("Flight of the Phoenix"). Her first encounter with Tyrol feels to her like a reunion:

Tyrol: Sharon?

Athena: Hello, Chief.

Tyrol: You know who I am?

Athena: Yes. We haven't met but I remember you. It's good to see you. ("Home, Part 2")

In fact, she feels like she already knows all of Boomer's old shipmates on *Galactica*, and they feel the same way:

Starbuck: You know, there are times when I look at you and I forget what you are. All I see is that kid that spooched her landings day after day. The kid that was frakking the Chief and thinking she was getting away with it.

Athena: Yeah, I remember. You were like a big sister. ("Scar")

As a general matter, Cylons seem to be specially connected to other copies of the same model, viewing these other copies with the affection one might have for close sisters or brothers, or perhaps identical twins. And just as identical twins are often said to know implicitly what one another are thinking, we have some evidence that Cylons of a single model can silently communicate with each other, and that an individual copy can speak for all the copies of that model ("Precipice"; "Rapture"). But even if the bond between Cylons of

The Identity of Cylons

the same model is typically quite strong, there's an unusually tight connection between Boomer and Athena. No matter how much she wants to distance herself from Boomer's actions, Athena thinks of herself as "Sharon." When several Cylons watch the footage from *Galactica* shot by D'Anna Biers, they catch a brief glimpse of the pregnant Athena. An Eight rejoices, "I'm still alive. She's still alive!" ("Final Cut"). Is her unusual use of the first-person a mere slip of the tongue? I'm inclined to think that it's not. I take this Eight to be Boomer, and the scene shows how closely she identifies with Athena.

And so we're back to our original question: How can Athena be Sharon, but a different Sharon? Accepting this puzzling claim seems to violate the transitivity of identity—a logical principle that Roslin certainly taught all the schoolchildren on New Caprica. According to this principle, if A is identical to B and B is identical to C, then A must be identical to C. Unfortunately, given the psychological theory of Cylon identity, we seem to have a case where A is identical to B and B is identical to C, but A *isn't* identical to C. Boomer, sitting dejectedly in her old apartment on Caprica after her Cylon nature has been revealed, can remember getting her wings ("Downloaded"). Athena, in the brig on *Galactica*, can remember that very same experience. Since each of them has the same memory of Boomer's earlier experience, the psychological theory implies that they're each identical to that earlier Boomer. But clearly Boomer and Athena aren't identical to one another. Rejecting the principle of the transitivity of identity isn't really an option—doing so would be like unleashing a Cylon "logic bomb"—so it looks like we're going to have to amend our theory of Cylon identity.

"It's Not Enough Just to Survive"—Or Is It?

In his influential book *Reasons and Persons*, Derek Parfit provides a new spin on the psychological theory of personal identity. According to Parfit, psychological continuity is important for a person's continued existence over time, but personal *survival* shouldn't be equated with personal *identity*. An individual may survive even when there's no later person who's identical to him. Were Parfit to write a sequel called *Reasons and Cylons*, I expect he'd offer an analogous theory. Suppose that Cylon resurrection could be repeated only a small

Amy Kind

number of times before critical errors started creeping into the process. After five resurrections, say, memories and other aspects of psychological continuity start significantly degrading, with more and more data loss occurring with each subsequent resurrection. A Cylon might wonder: At what point will I cease to exist? Will I still exist after ten resurrections? After eleven? Twelve? According to Parfit, such questions may not have a determinate answer.

When a Cylon resurrects, her consciousness is downloaded into a new body. But what if their technology is more advanced than we realize, and the consciousness can actually be simultaneously downloaded into two bodies at once?⁸ Because of Caprica Six's importance as a "hero of the Cylon," the Cylons might arrange for her consciousness to be downloaded into two different Sixes after her body is destroyed in the original attack on the Colonies. Along with all of her other memories, her memory of finding Baltar in bed with another woman gets passed to both of the resurrected Sixes, each of whom remembers the experience as if *she* was the one betrayed. Contemplating the future before the attack, should Caprica Six be concerned that she might "die" because her memories pass on to two other Sixes with whom she's not numerically identical? Because of the transitivity of identity, the two Sixes aren't identical to one another, so neither of them can be identical to Caprica Six, even though they both share her consciousness. We might explain this scenario by denying that Caprica Six still exists. Rather, there are two entirely new Six models who happen to share this memory. But Parfit would counsel Caprica Six not to be concerned. While it's true that she won't be identical to either of the Sixes in the future, she'll be psychologically continuous with both of them, and this continuity is still "about as good as ordinary survival."⁹

Suppose that her resurrection happens as it usually does, and Caprica Six's memory of witnessing Baltar's betrayal is transmitted to only one Six. Does Caprica Six survive? In fact, wouldn't we say that this new Six was identical to Caprica Six? The only reason we can't say the same in the previous case is that it results in two non-identical Cylons, and the original Caprica Six can't be identical to both. In this case, as Parfit suggests: "Nothing is *missing*. What is wrong can only be the duplication" (261). Thus, according to Parfit, we shouldn't care so much about identity, for it's not what matters to us in survival. He'd urge Caprica Six to reason as follows:

The Identity of Cylons

My relation to each resulting [Six] contains everything that would be needed for survival. This relation cannot be called identity because and only because it holds between me and *two* future [Cylons]. In ordinary death, this relation holds between me and no future [Cylon]. Though double survival cannot be described in the language of identity, it is not equivalent to death. Two does not equal zero. (278)

Parfit's claim sounds plausible. The fact that there are *two* Sharons doesn't mean that there's *no* Sharon—not that we ever thought that it did.¹⁰ Boomer and Athena aren't identical to one another, but to the extent that Athena shares psychological continuity with Boomer, some of Boomer survives with Athena. Suppose the Colonial fleet were to destroy a Cylon baseliner while Boomer was onboard. If the baseliner was too far away from a resurrection ship for her to download, Boomer would go out of existence. But to some degree, as long as Athena survives, Boomer survives too.

Should Boomer find any consolation in this? Parfit suggests that coming to understand the truth about personal identity is both liberating and consoling. Before developing his view, Parfit claims that he cared very much about his impending death and thus felt "imprisoned" in himself: "My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness." Upon changing his view, he says, "The walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air" (281). If we reject the importance of identity, we can recognize the importance of all sorts of connections between our current and future experiences. Death means the end of some of these connections, but others remain. Parfit thus contends that death no longer seems so bad. But he also admits that the truth about personal identity is hard to believe. It's hard, maybe even impossible, to let go of the importance of identity. So it's no wonder that when it comes to the question of Cylon identity, it all seems so *frakkin'* weird, even to the Cylons who experience it.

NOTES

- 1 There's a third view of personal identity, sometimes called *the simple view*, which holds that identity consists in neither psychological nor physical continuity—nor any other kind of continuity. Rather, a person's identity over time is an unanalyzable "brute fact." See Roderick Chisholm, *Person and Object* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1976).

Amy Kind

- 2 We'll set aside the possibility of bodily resurrection as described by Christianity. If true, it still differs from Cylon resurrection by being a one-shot deal.
- 3 John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 335. Further references will be given in the text.
- 4 See Sydney Shoemaker, "Personal Identity: A Materialist Account," in *Personal Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); and Peter Unger, *Identity, Consciousness, and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- 5 See Bernard Williams, "Personal Identity and Individuation" and "The Self and the Future," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).
- 6 I'm assuming that Roslin is human, not the (as yet unknown) final Cylon.
- 7 Mysteriously, however, she seems to remember what Adama says to Boomer's corpse when, upon reawakening from his coma, he visits *Galactica's* morgue and asks, "Why?" Soon after, he encounters Athena on Kobol and tries to strangle her. She whispers to him, "And you ask 'why?'" ("Home, Part 2"). Even Boomer shouldn't know what Adama says to her corpse, so Athena's knowledge here is particularly puzzling.
- 8 Perhaps something like this explains how Athena comes to share Boomer's memories.
- 9 Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 261. Further references will be given in the text.
- 10 *BSG* characters struggling with the discovery of Boomer's Cylon nature might be tempted to say things like, "There was no Sharon." But I think they just mean that Sharon turned out to be different from what they initially thought: she's a machine—a toaster—and not a human.