

'Personal Identity – Do We Have It, and Does it Matter?'

Introduction

My talk tonight is about my recent PhD thesis in philosophy, completed last year. I'll try to give you an overview of the work and of my aims, and how I came to do it. In condensing a large body of work into a short talk I have tried to avoid being, on the one hand over-complex, and on the other, simplifying the work so much as to make it appear trivial. So that I don't go over-time, it would be better if questions were left to later, and we can deal with questions of clarification first, should any remain.

The four sections to my talk concern first, the 'Problem' of personal identity, second, the position of my adversary Derek Parfit, third, my engagement with Parfit, and fourth, my reply to him, which forms the basis of my thesis. This final section will address five main objections. My thesis is entitled *Complex Persons: A Holistic Solution to Personal Identity*. It addresses areas in philosophy known as 'metaphysics', which is about the nature of *things* or *reality*, and 'ethics' which is about the nature of *actions* and *moral responsibility*. My talk tonight is entitled *Personal Identity – Do we have it, and Does it Matter?*

1 The Problem of Personal Identity

In 1984 American philosopher Derek Parfit published a book entitled *Reasons and Persons*.¹ Philosophy is sometimes described as *descriptive* in that it aims to explain why things are as they are, or as *revisionist* in that it aims to challenge deeply held assumptions about the nature of reality and/or our understanding of it (Parfit 184), p x. Parfit's book is essentially revisionary, as it challenges typical views of personhood and personal identity, and consequently, views of human reasoning, action, and moral responsibility.

The weight of Parfit's argument falls on a radically new conception of personhood and consequently, of personal identity, and on the moral responsibility for action which follows from it. Parfit argues that we ought to accept these new conceptions, even though they go against our intuitions. He claims they are more liberating than our current conceptions. While he presents detailed arguments for his position, I am disturbed by his claims, and attempt in my thesis to argue against them.

Personal identity in this sense can be briefly understood as the set of conditions under which a person remains the same person over time.² The current philosophical *problem* of Personal Identity is the problem of stipulating precisely what those conditions are. In its current form, this problem has beset philosophy since John Locke in the 17th century claimed that personal identity could be located in neither an unknowable soul or substance, nor in the physical body.

On the first of these claims, Locke views substance as knowable only through its attributes or observable qualities, and not 'in itself' – 'substance or something-I-know-not-what' as Locke puts it (Honderich, 1995) p 858. He thus avers that were the soul of one person to move to the body of another, there would be no discernible way that this could be known, and that therefore, personal identity cannot reside in the soul. On the second of these claims Locke points to the fact that the body undergoes cell-change throughout life, and therefore that personal identity cannot reside in the body either. Locke therefore concludes that personal identity resides in consciousness alone:

¹ Parfit, 1984.

² For comprehensive discussions on personal identity from a variety of perspectives see: (Baillie 1990) ; (Lyon 1988) ; (Maddell 1981) ; (Noonan 1989) ; (Noonan 1993) ; (Parfit 1984),: and (Shoemaker 1984) .

For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes every one to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thoughts, so far reaches the identity of that person: it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done (Locke 1959), 2.27.11.

Since Locke's time the prevailing philosophical view has been that personal identity resides in consciousness, but as the contents of consciousness are constantly changing, the problem of stipulating precise criteria has arisen.

In particular, consciousness of the past, or memories of past actions often dissipate over time, therefore raising the question: if personal identity is tied to memory and memory changes, or is lost, does personal identity also change? Another deep problem with Locke's theory is that it is inherently circular. If we pick out a certain person as being Fred because he has Fred's mind-contents, we must have already identified him as being Fred in order to know that the mind contents in question belong to Fred.

2 Parfitian Persons

Like many contemporary philosophers, Parfit has inherited the Lockean conception of personal identity. This conception is understood as the *psychological* approach to personal identity. Theories which embrace the psychological approach are criterial, as they specify the relevant criteria under which personal identity is preserved, and are known as versions of the *psychological continuity criterion*. Criterial theories are *reductionist* in that they hold that a set of criteria can provide a full description of something, in this case a person. Theories which hold that full descriptions cannot be provided are *non-reductionist*.

During the 20th century various criterial theories have been produced purporting to encapsulate and describe personal identity. They each attempt to overcome the difficulties of indeterminacy and circularity inherited from Locke, and the further difficulty which criterial theories hold, namely that of individuation. If a person is individuated and described according to a set of criteria, such as 'the person who has such-and-such a memory,' such a description could theoretically apply to more than one person. It is in constructing his version of the psychological continuity criterion that Parfit reaches his radical conclusions. His views on personhood, personal identity, and the consequent moral responsibility can be summarised as follows:

Parfit's Metaphysical Conclusions:

1. Personal identity is preserved in 'overlapping chains' of psychological connectedness. These overlapping chains contain memories, beliefs, and other mental items.³
2. Personal identity is preserved only when there is strong connectedness between these mental items, which for Parfit, means at least half the number of direct connections which hold in a single day. Where less than half are held, identity fails to be realised (Parfit 1984), p 206.
3. Personal identity accounts are accounts of psychological chains, and of the items within these chains. These accounts require reference neither to the items' ownership, nor to other items in the same chain. Neither do they require reference to particular bodies or brains, or to underlying entities such as souls or substantial selves.

³ For Parfit's claims on personal identity see (Parfit 1984), Part Three: *Personal Identity*, especially pp 199-217.

4. A causal relation pertains between the mental items in a mental chain. Three types of causes are possible, *Narrow*, *Wide*, or *Widest*, *Narrow* cause is the normal cause, such as the retention of memories in the normal way. *Wide* cause is any reliable cause, which for Parfit, could be a partial or complete brain transfer. *Widest* cause is any cause whatsoever, such as the complete reduplication of a person. For Parfit, the *Widest* criterion is best, as even if it is not true continuity, it is just as good. He claims that we should accept the *Widest* criterion because there could be instances when we would accept non-normal causation in relation to bodily functions, and we should therefore accept non-normal causation in relation to mental functions.

On Parfit's terms this means that were a person to be fully 'duplicated' in some artificial way, providing that only one person resulted from such a process, we should accept that person as being 'just as good' as the original person. Parfit terms this relation as *Relation R*, defined as 'non-branching psychological continuity with any cause' (Parfit 1984) pp 199-217.

In summary, the personal identity of Parfitian Persons is not tied to bodily identity, nor to relationships, nor to environments, nor to an underlying soul or self. Because personal identity is characterised in terms of a certain amount of overlapping chains, when less than this amount pertains, the person who then exists is a different person to the one who existed earlier. Thus, the life of a single body could encounter the existence of more than a single person.

A significant aspect of Parfit's view is that the existence of these persons at *different* times could be as distinct as the existence of different bodied persons at the *same* time. Finally, and crucially, because the change from one person to another could not be known, personal identity is often indeterminate, and is therefore, less important than psychological continuity. In short, for Parfit, personal identity '*is not what matters*' (Parfit 1984) p 217.

3 Parfit's Ethical Ramifications

Parfit refers to different persons connected to each other within the life-time of a single body as *series persons*. He claims that series persons may not be accountable for each other's actions, commitments, promises, sufferings, crimes, and so on. Moral responsibility between series persons diminishes in proportion to reduced psychological connectedness. This means that:

1. Commitments made earlier in life may not hold later in life if the identity of the person concerned is deemed to have changed (Parfit 1984), pp 327-329.
2. Similarly, persons who suffer early in life may not be compensated for that suffering later in life (Parfit 1984), p 346.
3. Crimes committed at an earlier time may not be punishable at a later time. For Parfit, a criminal may be 'less connected' to himself that he was at the time of the crime, and he may therefore, deserve less punishment, and in cases of very few connections, maybe no punishment at all (Parfit 1984), pp 326-346.
4. Because 'series persons' could be as separate from each other as spatially discrete persons, distributive justice between persons should be altered, that is, accorded 'more scope and less weight.' Justice across communities should be seen as more important than justice for individuals. Moral responsibility, compensation, commitment, and justice should be viewed similarly between series persons as they are between different bodied persons (Parfit 1984), pp 320-347.
5. 'Self-Interest' theories should be replaced by more impersonal theories, such as Parfit's 'Revised Self-Interest Theory,' according to which it may not be irrational to do things against one's own interests. For example, it would not be irrational to suffer hardship as long as *someone* benefited.

That the person who suffered is not the person who gains does not matter. On Parfit's view, identity is less deep, we should be more concerned with the quality of experiences, that with whose experiences they are (Parfit 1984), pp 320-347.

4 My Engagement with Parfit

Also in 1984. I began university, and while studying English and Philosophy as an undergraduate, developed an interest in the topic of 'the self.' When taking up this topic as a post-graduate, I was advised to investigate the self from the perspective of personal identity, as this area holds many unanswered questions in current philosophical thinking.

The difficulty which has beset philosophy from the time of Locke is that of providing adequate criteria, due to the problems of indeterminacy, circularity, and individuation. These problems have led many thinkers, such as Parfit, to dismiss personal identity as insignificant and inconsequential. The view seems to be that there are no substantial entities, such as souls or unchanging selves, in which to ground personal identity, and that, therefore personal identity does not exist, and any idea we have of it is merely an illusion.

When I first encountered this topic, I discovered a huge array of literature, in which various thinkers devised new and wonderful schemes, mostly based on eccentric thought-experiments in order to explain why we don't really have personal identity, and why we mistakenly think we do. Because Parfit's work was particularly thorough, and radical in its conclusions, it proved a useful focus for my thinking, and, as it turned out, an appropriate adversarial topic for my thesis. I was also disturbed by some of the implications of Parfit's claims, and will mention just three.

First, Parfit's excessively psychological approach completely rejects the role of the body in personhood and personal identity. This seemed to me to neglect much of who and what persons are, and to tacitly imply that what happens to the body is of little or no importance to persons' well-being, leaving open the possibility for forms of abuse, such as starvation or torture, which are experienced first and foremost through the body. This view also fails to recognise the role of the body in achieving and maintaining particular psychological states or memories.

Second, the ramifications of Parfit's theory produce capricious and unworkable attitudes towards moral responsibility. Tying moral responsibility to a certain amount of memory retention, rather than to a single-bodied person effectively devalues moral responsibility as it leaves the way wide open for manipulation and injustice, and counts against long-term personal or societal reform.

Because they had 'forgotten' their crimes, persons guilty of corporate fraud, or war criminals, could live in luxury on exotic islands, whether or not they had compensated their victims or experienced remorse and undergone reform.

In Parfit's view it is the *quantity* of change which counts, whereas in my view, it is the *quality* of change that matters. Third, and finally, Parfit's effective discarding of the self means that the possibility of a transcendent soul, and of an empirical self are dismissed without either having had proper investigation.

Like many materialist philosophers, Parfit conflates the question of soul and the question of self into a single question, resulting in neither being addressed satisfactorily. Souls cannot be found so they don't exist, and selves are no more than bundles of experiences, with no efficaciousness or potential. In my view, there is no evidence in the personal identity debate to pronounce on souls, and the devaluing of self provides no explanation for the operation of agency, or the emergence of creativity.

In view of these and similar problems I argue against Parfit on the grounds that the reductionist, criterial approach of the psychological continuity criterion is inadequate to account for personal identity. I further argue that a sound approach to personal identity must respect the complex, dynamic, holistic, non-reductive nature of persons.

To argue this case, I select five areas where I see Parfit's argument as deficient. These concern Parfit's method of analysis, his disregard of the interdependence between minds and the environments in which they exist and operate, his failure to recognise the predominantly holistic structure of minds, his neglect of the body's role in mind formation and operation, and finally, his view of the self as illusory and insignificant to experience. These problems are now addressed.

5 My Response to Parfit

Parfit's Methodology

Like many theorists, Parfit bases most of his conclusions about personal identity on thought experiments. He imagines scenarios in which persons undergo brain-transplants, or are reduplicated, either bit by bit or all at once. One example is his thought experiment in which he imagines that a Scanner on earth, while destroying his brain and body, records the states of all their cells. These states are relayed to Mars, and a new person is reconstructed in accordance with them.

Because there is a causal connection of some kind between the original Parfit on earth and the 'new' Parfit on Mars, the requirements of Relation R have been met. This means that while on the basis of the Narrow criterion, that is, the maintenance of psychological continuity in the normal way, the new person would not be him, on the basis of the two Wide Criteria, the new person *would* be him (Parfit, 1984), p 209. Parfit claims that personal identity does not matter, but that 'what matters is Relation R: psychological connectedness and/or continuity with the right kind of cause' and that 'The right kind of cause could be any cause' (Parfit 1984), p 215.

There are a number of problems with this argument, but I will refer to just two. As mentioned, Relation R requires that causal connections be present between mental states for those states to be recognised as successive states in the same chain. But, as Robert Elliot points out, Parfit's causal continuity requirements – designated by Elliot as 'CCR' – are virtually ineffectual, and do nothing for Parfit's theory (Elliot 1991). Elliot claims that with or without CCR, Parfit's theory is meaningless.

Elliot justifies this claim by producing a series of thought experiments which show up the anomalies of Parfit's reasoning. These thought experiments refer to cases where individuals are intentionally reconstructed out of new materials, and cases where individuals are accidentally reconstructed out of new materials – the machinery goes wrong, but the new person just happens to turn out as intended.

If both cases result in an individual appearing who is apparently identical to the former person, Elliot claims there is no logical reason why we should accept the former case and not the latter. Thus, if we are prepared to accept reconstruction or reduplication, causal connectedness ultimately has no force. According to Elliot, 'psychological continuity theories which include CCR are unstable: either CCR must be dropped or the psychological continuity approach must be abandoned (Elliot 1991), p 58. And of course, without causal connections, it is difficult to see how a theory of psychological continuity could be sustained.

Another major problem with Parfit's theory is his whole approach to the question of personal identity. All his arguments are based on the assumption that we would accept without question that psychological continuity encapsulates personal identity. None of his arguments actually question this stance, or prove why it is the right one, it is just taken for granted. As put in my thesis:

Personal Identity is a matter of psychological continuity. We can see this because in cases where bodily continuity and psychological continuity become disconnected, personal identity is maintained in virtue of psychological continuity. That is, we can see that personal identity is maintained because we can see that psychological continuity is maintained. Therefore, personal identity is a matter of psychological continuity (Enright 2002), pp 63-64.

There is no justification in this argument that psychological continuity holds any primacy over any other kind of continuity, or that psychological states operate independently of other states. If issues other than psychology were involved in personal identity, they would not be revealed in this type of argument. These and similar arguments draw my conclusion that analysis of *real* persons, rather than imaginary ones, is required to satisfactorily investigate personal identity. It is in this type of analysis that the weight of my remaining arguments fall. The first of these concerns the way in which Parfit treats the mind as autonomous and separate from the environment or external factors which contribute to its formation and operation. I claim that this is a mistake, and does not represent how minds function and operate. This does not mean that minds are *reducible* to environments and external factors, only that they are interdependent with them.

Outside Minds

Parfit allows that any kind of causal connections can preserve personal identity. This means that the original cause of mental content, such as an experience, could be overlooked. This is evident both when considering Parfit's thought experiments where the cause of psychological continuity could simply be a mechanical reduplication of a mental state, rather than reference to the experience which first caused that state, and also when considering the memories of series persons whose present memories are distantly connected to former events, but because of reduced psychological connectedness, are not recognised as maintaining personal identity. This view effectively disregards the correlation between what goes on inside the mind, and what goes on outside the mind.

In philosophy this is recognised as the debate between *internalism* and *externalism*. I cannot go into this debate here, except to say that in this instance the internalist view is problematic as it takes no account of how minds operate, of their evolutionary origins, or of their development which begins in infancy. What is often missed by Parfit and similar personal identity theorists at this point is that we are not here just dealing with *particular* mental states, but with the question of how we can have mental states *at all*.

As pointed out by Donald Davidson, minds do not operate in vacuums, but are intrinsically related to the social and historical contexts in which people live. He claims it is impossible to have 'pure objects of thought' disconnected from a community of shared beliefs, languages, social practices, concerns, goals, and activities. Indeed, it is only through shared practices, activities, and experiences that thoughts of any kind can gain meaning (Davidson 1987), pp 159-172. Similarly, Jeff Malpas argues that mental contents must be connected to a spatially-ordered world, and to agent-centred action (Malpas 1999), pp 92-96. Without this connection a thought could neither refer to anything, nor reflect any experience. It is thus a mistake to conceptualise a thought or memory as if it was disconnected from, and unrelated to the individual and the world in which it was created. Parfit's discrete characterisation of the mind and its contents fails to recognise these connections.

Another deficiency of Parfit's is his failure to recognise the inherent connection between the mind and perception. Perception is the way in which the mind receives information from the environment through the senses. Without this information minds would be empty and without material for thought. Even abstract thoughts are ultimately related to the contents of experiences, received through perceptual apparatus.

In cases where the mind receives non-conceptual knowledge, such as through religious experience, unless such knowledge is translated into perceptual and conceptual frameworks, it cannot be communicated through language. The mind's origins are recognised by Ethology as lying in our need to cope with a complex environment with a complex array of sensual input.⁴ According to this theory, there is an interdependence between perceptual apparatus, mind, and environment, the origins of which reach back to our needs as early humans to come to terms with our environment and secure safe and suitable habitats.⁵

Similarly, Ecological Psychology teaches that all creatures, including humans respond to the items in the environment which are of interest to them, in particular, those which concern survival.⁶ While there are a multitude of environmental signals to which we could respond, we pick up only on those which interest us and are of concern to us. It is these which provide the material for our thoughts. Without them minds would not exist and thought would be impossible. It is thus a mistake to treat minds as if they operate autonomously from the environment in which they are situated.

And finally, biology reveals how the very process of visual perception, a key element of perceptual input, can only develop and function in virtue of the relation between our visual apparatus and its immediate environment. Like other senses, vision does not occur as a given, but as a process of development and interaction over a period of time between perceptual apparatus, environment, and mind. Research in all these areas demonstrates various ways in which both minds and environments are intricately related and interdependent, and that the theoretical separation which occurs in Parfit's thought experiments is erroneous, as is also the conceptualisation of persons and the ethical ramifications which he holds to follow from this separation.

Inside Minds

In addition to treating the mind as independent of the external environment, Parfit also views mind contents as independent of each other. He sees thoughts as atomistic and impersonal. The impersonal characterisation of thoughts is intended to overcome the circularity problem already referred to. If ownership is not part of the description of a thought, then appropriating that thought to a particular person is no longer circular. I argue that Parfit is mistaken in his atomistic, impersonal characterisation of thoughts, on the grounds that minds are predominately holistic in structure and functioning, and indeed, need to be so in order to have any thoughts at all. If thoughts were disconnected from each other, there is no way that they could embody meaning or be retained as memories. This does not mean that every thought is semantically connected to every other thought – we all have disparate thoughts at times, but it does mean that a certain degree of semantic connection is necessary for psychological coherence to hold.

While Parfit uses unlikely thought experiments to argue his case, such as those in which single thoughts are supposedly transferable from one person to another, I refer in my thesis to memory research in which the operation of real persons' memory is tested under a variety of conditions. Also referred to are studies of faulty memory operation, such as mistaken eye-witness testimony, memory illusions, false memories, and false recognition. These memory studies are too detailed to go into here, but the important point is that they show clearly that no memories are pure and isolated, but are intimately connected with other memories, experiences, relationships, and places.

⁴ *Ethology* is a biological approach to the study of animal behaviour, which is concerned with the animal's natural environment (Tortora and Becker 1978), p 777. For seminal work in ethology, see (von Uexkull 1934).

⁵ For a delightful expose of this view, see the seminal work of von Uexkull (von Uexkull 1934) especially his illustrations of animal habitats.

⁶ *Ecological Psychology* is a psychology which recognises that the physical and biological features of the environment affect and influence mental life (Reed 1996), p 7. For foundational work in ecological psychology, see (Gibson 1977).

The unique sum of these connections means that each memory is unique to its owner. Were a memory to have a different owner, the memory would be different also. In summary, research shows that memories are formed and shaped only in virtue of the environments and circumstances in which they occur, such that the notion of impersonal or transferable memory makes absolutely no sense, and in fact, robs memories of the content which makes them what they are.

Disembodied Minds

A further major problem with Parfit's conception of personal identity is his complete disregard for the body. While he sees the body as a necessary 'vehicle' for the mind, he conceives it as being silent and inert, contributing nothing of consequence to mental life, and correspondingly, to personal identity. This is evident from the thought experiments in which he imagines partial or complete brain transfers from one body to another, in which, according to him, the mental life, and consequently the personal identity, go with the brain, rather than with the body. I claim that this approach is misleading, partly as personal identity is very much related to the body, and also as mental states are influenced by the body, and individuated by bodily location and bodily continuity.

If bodily identity were not involved in personal identity, re-identification of persons as we know it would become impossible. In addition, brains and bodies are not discrete, but operate as an integral unity, such that if one were significantly altered, the other would be altered also. In arguing my case, I investigate the various ways in which the brain and body are connected, and in which they influence mental life. For example, the body has eleven major systems, including the nervous system involving the brain, all of which are interconnected, and influenced by the environment through bodily action and functioning.

Drugs, hormones, injury, illness, and nutrition are just some of the ways in which the body influences the mind, such that were the mind to be 'connected' to a different body, the mind would be different also. While I do not argue that the mind is reducible to the brain, I do argue that it is interdependent with the brain, and crucially influenced by it, and consequently, by the body also. When the various connections between mind and body are recognised, the erroneousness of Parfit's notion of series persons within the life of a single body becomes evident. So many of our actions, habits and propensities, the things that make us what we are, are deeply ingrained in the body, such that regardless of memory-change, the idea that disparate persons inhabit a single body cannot be sustained.

The Dynamic Self

Finally, Parfit's neglect of the self is a serious flaw in his argument. By arguing against the notion of a continuing self, Parfit removes the ground of mental life, of agency, and consequently, of bodily action. Without the unity which the self provides, engagement with the world and intentional action would be impossible. Parfit claims that no 'underlying entities' can be found, and that therefore, non exist. He sees persons as no more than bundles of perceptions, and that it is therefore irrational to prefer self-concern over other concern. I argue against this view, claiming that it is only in view of self-concern that I can even understand what other-concern is like. Through my own needs and wants I become aware of the needs and wants of others. And through my developing self-awareness, I develop an awareness of others also. An important aspect of my argument is that self-awareness first occurs through the body, and only later becomes a concept about which I can think and reflect.

Infant studies show that the infant's very first engagement with the world is one in which self-awareness is crudely present in bodily movement, and develops incrementally over time with each experience.⁷ These experiences involve movement, memory, relationships, imitation, and a gradual dawning of self-conscious self-awareness.

⁷ For example, see (Butterworth 1995) and (Sheets-Johnson 1999).

As infants develop into adults, autobiographical memories in particular form a key role in consolidating and confirming the sense of self, without which intentional action of any kind could not occur. Between infancy and adulthood various aspects of the self develop, until at the conceptual level, the narrative self is the one which permits us to see our lives as coherent wholes, rather than lives that are atomistic and disconnected (Freeman 1993). It can be seen here that a major problem with Parfit's series persons is that they would be unable to conceptualise their lives as coherent wholes between birth and death.

6 Summary

Parfitian Persons are fragmentary persons. They have little self-knowledge and indeterminate lives. They may not be responsible for their actions, and may not even know for sure which actions they have performed. I find it difficult to see how this diminished conception of personhood can lead to a better society, as suggested by Parfit. I rather think it would lead to less respect for others, and to less appreciation for the consequences of our actions. Why should I care what I do if it does not matter to whom I do it, or if I can later say, well that was not *me* who did that, it was someone else?

Parfit sees his conception of personhood as more liberating, but I fear that the opposite would be true. Unless persons can consider themselves as integral wholes, any attempt at reform, reparation, self-improvement, or the development of wisdom would be futile. Knowing that I am now, and will be in the future responsible for my actions is likely to make me monitor those actions more carefully than if I knew they would subsequently be appropriated to someone else. Finally, while my account of personal identity is intended to be neither definitive nor entire, I claim that although a complete account of personal identity may never be able to be given, any attempt at such an account should give due recognition the above dynamic, holistic, and non-reductive elements which I believe to be integral to what persons fundamentally are.

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