

Parfit's project

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1 The example of teletransportation

In a familiar kind of science fiction example, people acquire the ability to ‘travel’ by teletransportation. One’s body is destroyed in the machine, and the information is relayed to some distant location, at which one’s body is re-created.

In Parfit’s version of the case, the teletransportation machine does not destroy the body. Parfit imagines, however, that it does damage the heart of the person who got into the machine:

‘I later talk, by two-way television, to my Replica on Mars. Let us continue the story. Since my Replica knows that I am about to die, he tries to console me with the same thoughts with which I recently tried to console a dying friend. It is sad to learn, on the receiving end, how unconsoling these thoughts are. My Replica then assures me that he will take up my life where I leave off. He loves my wife, and together they will care for my children. And he will finish the book that I am writing. Besides having all of my drafts, he has all of my intentions. I must admit that he can finish my book as well as I could. All these facts console me a little. Dying when I know that I shall have a Replica is not quite as bad as, simply, dying. Even so, I shall soon lose consciousness, forever.’

Parfit thinks that most of us hold that being replicated and then dying is just about as bad as simply dying. One of his main aims is to argue that this natural assumption is false. Having a Replica which continues to exist is just about as good as ordinary survival. He argues for this in a somewhat roundabout way, via examination of some fundamental questions about the nature of persons and their existence.

2 Reductionist theories of personal identity over time

When Parfit talks about theories of personal identity over time, he is talking about attempts to answer this question:

‘What makes a person at two different times one and the same person? What is necessarily involved in the continued existence of each person over time?’

Here’s the first answer to this question Parfit considers:

‘The Physical Criterion: (1) What is necessary is not the continued existence of the whole body, but the continued existence of enough of the brain to be the brain of a living person. X today is one and the same person as Y at some past time if and only if (2) enough of Ys brain continued to exist, and is now Xs brain, and (3) this physical continuity has not taken a ‘branching’ form. (4) Personal identity over time just consists in the holding of facts like (2) and (3).’

What should proponents of the Physical Criterion say about cases of teletransportation?

The next main view Parfit discusses is the view that identity over time has to do with psychological connections rather than physical connections.

John Locke had a view like this, according to which the relevant connections are connections of memory. Parfit liberalizes the view, to allow for psychological connections of all sorts — why might one do this?

Parfit arrives at the following version of the view in question:

‘The Psychological Criterion: (1) There is psychological continuity if and only if there are overlapping chains of strong connectedness. X today is one and the same person as Y at some past time if and only if (2) X is psychologically continuous with Y, (3) this continuity has the right kind of cause, and (4) it has not taken a ‘branching’ form. (5) Personal identity over time just consists in the holding of facts like (2) to (4).’

Why does Parfit appeal to ‘overlapping chains’ here?

Parfit further distinguishes between three versions of the psychological criterion, based on three different interpretations of condition (3).

These views, Parfit says, are all ‘reductionist.’ They are reductionist because they hold that facts about personal identity over time can be explained in terms of the holding of certain other facts, which do not themselves involve claims about the identity of the person in question.

3 Non-reductionist views of personal identity over time

These are the two main reductionist views of personal identity over time – but there are also non-reductionist views. These are views which deny that facts about personal identity over time can be explained in more basic terms.

One such view is Descartes' view that persons are immaterial souls. Presumably their identity over time cannot be given in more basic terms. Parfit also says that there are non-dualist versions of non-reductionism. These are what he calls 'further fact' views.

How do we tell whether we accept a reductionist or a non-reductionist view of some kind of thing? Parfit says:

'If we accept a Reductionist View, we shall believe that the identity of such a thing may be, in a quite unpuzzling way, indeterminate.'

This is true, Parfit thinks, for any kind of entity about which reductionism is true. For example, it is very plausible that reductionism is true of clubs, or sports teams. It is very plausible that the identity over time of a sports team can be indeterminate.

One way to explain what Parfit has in mind here: the distinction between substantive and verbal (or as he says, 'empty') questions.

But, Parfit says, we do not think this about our own existence over time. So, he thinks, most of us (implicitly) accept a non-reductionist view of our own existence over time. This, he will try to show, is a mistake.

4 The plan

At the end of this section, Parfit lays out a number of things that he plans to argue for:

Personal identity is not what matters. In the Branch Line case, my Replica survives and I die. But my Replica's survival is almost as good as my own survival. In this sense, personal identity is not 'what matters.'

If personal identity is what matters, then non-reductionism is true.

If non-reductionism is true, then we are separately existing entities (e.g., immaterial souls).

We are not separately existing entities — so reductionism is true, and personal identity is not what matters.