



University of Wales, Lampeter 1·8·2·2 Prifysgol Cymru Llanbedr Pont Steffan

Assignment coversheet/feedback form:

THIS SHEET MUST BE THE FIRST PAGE OF THE ASSIGNMENT YOU ARE SUBMITTING (DO NOT SEND AS A SEPARATE FILE)

For completion by student:

Student Name: David Verrill

Module code: 1PHIL06101T2

Module title: Metaphysics

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Educational support needs:
No

Assignment title: Does Parfit show that 'the survival of a person, like that of a nation, is a matter of degree'? What implications would this have for my thought about myself and others?

For completion by marker:

Comments:

This is good work. You have a good grasp of Parfit's view, and present it well. And you raise highly pertinent concerns about it.

Marker's signature: DC

Date: 13/3/10

Provisional mark: 65

NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the final examination board.

Does Parfit show that 'the survival of a person, like that of a nation, is a matter of degree'?

What implications would this have for my thought about myself and others?

The above quote¹ sums up Derek Parfit's position on personal identity. Parfit takes one of two views that he presents, namely the 'reductionist' or 'complex' view of personal identity. That is to say that what is important in deciding whether a person encountered is the same person or a different person is dependent on a 'psychological continuity' and 'connectedness'.² He presents arguments for taking this position as opposed to the alternative 'simple' or 'none-reductionist' view. Parfit argues that his view gives a better explanation than the simple view does despite being difficult for most people to accept. He goes on to recognise that his view has implications regarding how we should feel and behave towards our-selves and others. He claims that if the person's psychology has changed such that they become unrecognisable as the same person then they can be deemed to be a different person and no obligations to them now hold. Parfit takes such obligations to have been due to a rational connection whereby the specific identity of a being gives it a certain status in regard to how it is to be treated. Seeing that this runs counter to how we as humans would like to see ourselves as behaving towards each-other he says that such behaviour should be governed by moral considerations and so he would look towards a reclaiming and extension of morality to personal and interpersonal interaction.³

Commented [1]: This is a very good introductory paragraph.

I hope in this essay to explain Derek Parfit's view of personal identity and point out some of the problems with it including the lack of attention paid to a 'numerical' idea of identity which is neglected by Parfit in favour of the 'qualitative' idea of identity. I will try to offer some resolution and suggest areas of concern to thinkers on this issue. Is a two dimensional approach to personal identity where context and circumstances weighs how identity is to be considered.

Derek Parfit engages with the problems of 'personal identity'. These being what is it that allows us to recognise a person and that it does not appear as straight forward as commonly regarded. Parfit takes ideas brought forward by John Locke in his 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding'⁴. In this Locke puts forward the idea that the body is not important in deciding if a person is the same as one encountered before, but it is memory that is crucial. What makes some one the same person is that they have the memories of that person. Parfit takes up various criticisms of this idea and presents a robust version of this.

We are presented with two conflicting views on what makes some one the same. The one to which Parfit subscribes is the 'Reductionist' view as mentioned above. By this view personal identity "consists in the holding of certain other facts... in various kinds of psychological continuity... which in turn depend on bodily continuity". This is opposed to the 'non-reductionist' where while bodily and psychological continuities are acknowledged what is important to sameness of person is another "further factor". Where the reductionist view has the factors that are important to identity of people are

1 Derek Parfit, 'Later selves and moral principles', in Alan Montefiore (ed), "Philosophy and Personal Relations" (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973) p140

2 Terms used by Parfit throughout his work on personal identity.

3 A fairly concise exposition of this can be found in, Derek Parfit, 'Personal Identity and Rationality', *Synthese*, Vol. 53, No. 2, Matters of the Mind (Nov., 1982), pp. 227-241
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20115799?seq=7&Search=yes&term=%22Derek+Parfit%22&list=hide&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dau%253A%2522Derek%2BParfit%2522%26wc%3Don&item=1&ttl=20&returnArticleService=showArticle&resultsServiceName=doBasicResultsFromArticle>, accessed 2010-03-01 18:13:52

4 John Locke, 'Of Identity and Diversity', Book II chapter 27, 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' first published in 1694, reprinted in John Perry(ed), 'Personal Identity', (University of California Press, 1975)
 Philosophy Department Module Title: Metaphysics 1PHIL06101T2 David Verrill 29000460

of the same nature of those of any multifaceted object the simple view holds that people are a special case. The complex view has it that those factors and how they change the degree to which they are 'connected' and 'continuous' is all that is important leaving "nothing left to know" about the person and that there are "no definite answers" to the question of sameness of person the 'further fact' of the simple view is an illusion. The simple view says here that identity can be definitely determined.⁵

What Parfit is saying here is that it is the psychological constituents that make up the essential nature of a person. He is recognising that these change as events occur in the life of a person and as these constituents change and become different the person becomes different to the extent that with enough change they are no longer identifiable as the same person.

Parfit gives arguments throughout his papers on personal identity for this view. He claims that nowhere can be found the special extra factor that gives the permanent selfhood of the simple view. He presents various thought experiments where psychological components are swapped between people and bodies and asks for the answer to the question who is who. To which the answer is always to compare how closely the new person produced by the experiment resembles the person or people we started with. He presents a compelling model of the make up of a person's character and equates that following Locke to the identity of the person.

Having given an explanation of what makes a person the same as or different from someone else and importantly the same as or different from their future or past selves, Parfit draws attention to how this explanation has implications. These are to how we must relate to those different selves and he asserts that the commonly held simple view of what makes some one the same person gives an incorrect, or irrational, way of behaving.

With regard to attitudes and behaviour towards oneself an attitude of uninvolvedness is encouraged. This means that we are encouraged to think of our future or past selves as we would an other person, but one we are similar to in various degrees. Our behaviours and attitudes to that person should be governed to the extent of those similarities and their relevance. This leads to a justification of short term thinking of oneself as future selves will be quite different from me now so I have little responsibility to them. This lead to justification of a hedonistic life style and a self indulgence regardless of what may happen to me in the future as in a very real sense I will not exist. Parfit tries to get round this by substituting a moral concern rather than a rational selfish one. He proposes that while we need not care what happens to 'me' in the future as it will not be 'me' I do have a moral responsibility to that person and to that person more than any other as my acts now influence that person in ways that are more dramatic than anyone else's action or my ability to influence anyone else.⁶ Parfit argues that this new territory for morality would lead to a better society with people given a moral motivation to look after themselves rather than a self concerning one that has overtones of immorality. There are still issues of anticipation to be considered. For example should I care that someone else will benefit from the holiday I am planning. The moral obligation here seems much less pressing, but perhaps there is some truth to not planning such things too far ahead as I may no longer enjoy such activities or locations as I do now.

Commented [2]: This is a rather long and convoluted sentence. If you broke it up you could make each point more sharply.

Commented [3]: It would also be worth stressing here that, for Parfit, 'being the same person' is a matter of degree ie even in less extreme cases the idea that 'he is the same person' may not carry the full weight that we normally assume.

Commented [4]: Again, you may be trying to pack too much into one sentence.

Commented [5]: Do you mean: this may seem to lead to ? And is it quite fair? Isn't the point more: it may seem to lead to giving all the weight to *immediate* concerns (which need not be hedonistic).

Commented [6]: I don't follow you here. Are you suggesting that Parfit is committed to this? Why?

⁵ Quoting and paraphrasing Derek Parfit, 'Personal Identity and Rationality', [Synthese](#), Vol. 53, No. 2, Matters of the Mind (Nov., 1982), pp. 227-241

⁶ Derek Parfit, 'Personal Identity and Rationality', [Synthese](#), Vol. 53, No. 2, Matters of the Mind (Nov., 1982), pp. 227-241

There are also implications to how we would treat other people. Such as should we care for ageing, senile parents as their identity is clearly different from the people who cared for us when we were young so we owe them nothing. Or should we bother to pay debts as the people to which we owe them if long term loans will no longer exist. The complex view of identity seems to lead to a counter intuitive expression of relations with people and a very unpleasant one at that. Perhaps a moral solution to this issue can also be produced, but it has a very unsatisfactory feel.

Commented [7]: You need to say a bit more here. Isn't it fairly clear what Parfit will say about these cases? You should say something about why you think his response is unsatisfactory.

Having explored Parfit's views some kind of analysis is called for. The stress Parfit places on psychological and indeed physical qualities as constituting personal identity can be seen as placing all of the requirements of recognising a person or any thing on the qualities of that person or thing. There is another aspect to deciding whether a thing is the same and that is the notion of 'Numerical' identity.

Commented [8]: At the end of the day, does Parfit really give any weight to these?

By this measure of identity some thing is not the same by virtue of having the same qualities, but by virtue of having continuity of existence through time. For example my pocket watch now is the one given to me by my parents fifteen years ago. It is a little worn, some of the gold plating has rubbed off and the spring that opens the front cover is broken. The watch's qualities have changed, but it is the same watch. If a new watch of the same make and model were shown to me by numerical standards it would not be the same watch as my watch was when it was new although it's qualities are the same as my watch had then. However by a 'Qualitative' measure of identity it would be. In terms of sameness the overriding measure of identity of such an inanimate object is held to be its Numerical identity. There are clearly two dimensions to judge identity by. Both give good information to the sameness of a thing, but the Numerical holds sway.

Commented [9]: Do you need to make this claim in a general way? I guess there are occasions on which qualitative identity is what is important. That will leave your central point standing.

To put this in to 'Complex' and 'Simple' views of identity the Numerical identity of an object fulfils the need of the 'Simple' view for a 'further' factor and provides a firm footing to the commonly accepted view of sameness of a person with their past and future selves. This does however knock down an aspect of the 'Simple' view as put forward by Parfit. By giving Numerical identity prime of place it follows that 'personal identity' is indeed the same as the identity of any object complex or not.

So what can be taken from Parfit's presentation of 'personal identity'? Having taken back the primacy of 'Numerical' identity and reasserted the rationality of our everyday experience of ourselves and that of other we cannot rest easy. The unity of the self with some mystical something holding it together has been dispelled. The characteristics that make up my psychological state is the every day 'me' that I experience and as an understanding of who I am and what I care about this 'Qualitative' dimension of my identity is clearly very important to how I experience the world and interact with it.

Commented [10]: I am not completely clear, from what you say in this paragraph, why you say this. Perhaps it will become clear. (It does become clearer. I guess this connects with my previous comment.)

How others are regarded also has an element which is strongly dependent on their characteristics. In terms of roles we play in the world the qualities of a person are vital and define much of a person's public identity. For example my lecturers are such by virtue of their knowledge of their subjects and ability to transmit that knowledge to me and inspire me to study their subjects. I owe them respect to the extent that they fulfil these qualities. The 'Numerical identity' of the lecturer is only of minimal importance in giving some continuity to the learning experience. If another person turned up to the lecture and did just as good a job of teaching me their 'Numerical identity' would be unimportant in respect to my learning needs. On the other hand as soon as I start getting to know them as people the dimension of who they are changes. An exploration of the connectedness and interaction of 'Numerical' and 'Qualitative' conceptions of personal identity seems to have been neglected and the various expression of who we are and how we encounter each other may well be beneficial.

In conclusion I have discussed aspects of 'personal identity' or how we recognise people. I have focused on the work of Derek Parfit, showing that while largely consistent his view of that which is important in identifying some one as being their psychological characteristics it leads to rather strange ways of thinking about our behaviour and obligations to ourselves and each other. It neglects the 'Numerical' aspect of the identity of people largely through too much abstract thinking. While Parfit has perhaps gone too far down the path of attributing 'personal identity' to a person's qualities I think that something valuable can be taken from his investigation and a better understanding of who we are to ourselves and each other can be sought with reference to this point of view.

Bibliography

John Locke, 'Of Identity and Diversity', Book II chapter 27, 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' first published in 1694, reprinted in John Perry(ed), 'Personal Identity', (University of California Press, 1975)

Geoffrey Madel, 'Derek Parfit and Greta Garbo' I [Analysis](#), Vol. 45, No. 2 (Mar., 1985), pp. 105-109 published by: [Oxford University Press](#) on behalf of [The Analysis Committee](#) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3327467?seq=5> , accessed 2010-03-01 09:40:30

Derek Parfit, 'Later selves and moral principles', in Alan Montefiore (ed), "Philosophy and Personal Relations" (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973) p140