

### Parfit: Identity Doesn't Matter

1. **Derek Parfit:** A British philosopher, recently deceased. Mostly an ethicist, but also dabbles in metaphysics. Parfit is a partisan of the psychological criterion of personal identity (Psych<sub>=</sub>).
2. **Parfit's Thesis:** Personal identity does not matter for survival, memory, or moral responsibility.

More exactly:

Certain important questions [regarding survival, memory, and responsibility] do presuppose a question about personal identity. But they can be freed of this presupposition. And when they are, the question about identity has no importance. (p. 4)

### 3. Fission Cases Reconsidered:

**RECALL:** Psych<sub>=</sub> appear to give incoherent results when applied to fission cases.

Parfit: “Fission cases present a problem independently of any commitment to Psych<sub>=</sub>”.

There are only three possibilities in a fission case:

- (a) *A* does not survive.
- (b) *A* survives as either *A*<sub>1</sub> or *A*<sub>2</sub>.
- (c) *A* survives as both.

- **Against (a):** Half a brain is enough to survive when there's no fission. (“How could a double success be a failure?”)
- **Against (b):** Nothing makes *A* one of the descendants rather than another.
- **Against (c):** This seems incoherent (recall the arg. vs. Psych<sub>=</sub>)

**An alternative way of making out (C):** *A* survives as a person with a “divided mind”: A person (*A*) who has two other persons (*A*<sub>1</sub> and *A*<sub>2</sub>) as parts.

**Another Alternative:** *A*<sub>1</sub> and *A*<sub>2</sub> share a body before the fission. (Example: highways that coincide and then part.)

**Parfit:** These alternatives “alter our concept of a person.” (I’m not sure this is true: corporations, *etc.*)

**Parfit’s Answer** “I don’t know (and you don’t either)”: **there is no answer** to the question of which post-fission person is identical to *A*.

4. **Parfit on survival:** **Survival** presupposes personal identity. But **what matters in survival** does not. Psychological continuity, even when unaccompanied by identity, contains all that matters to us about our own survival.

**Analysis of Survival:**

“Will I survive?” seems, I said, equivalent to “Will there be some person alive who is the same person as me?” (p. 9)

**Identity Analysis** *p* survives some change *c* if and only if there is some person alive after *c* who is identical to *p*.

Parfit: the lesson of fission is that we should **stop using this notion**, except in cases where the relation of psychological continuity does not “branch”.

New notion:

***q*-survival** *p* *q*-survives some change *c* if and only if there is at least one person alive (and maybe more) after *c* who is psychologically connected to *p*.

**What kinds of psychological connections?**

- **Not memory:** Memory involves identity: If I **really remember** having some experience, then I had that experience.
- ***q*-memory** I *q*-remember having an experience if and only if (1) I seem to remember having the past experience; (2) someone really did have this past experience; and (3) my apparent memory was caused in some appropriate way by that past experience.

**NOTE:** This simplifies and alters a bit Parfit’s definition on p. 15.

**NOTE:** The *B*-body-person can *q*-remember *A*’s experiences without being identical to *A*.

**IMPORTANCE** What is important to us in survival, responsibility, future self-regarding concern, *etc.*, tracks q-survival rather than survival.

**CASE:** Fission as a defense to murder.

## 5. What's Parfit's View of Personal Identity?

### (a) No Fission Cases:

$X$  and  $Y$  are the same person if they are psychologically continuous and there is no person who is contemporary with either and psychologically continuous with the other. (p. 13)

### (b) We Need More:

All we have is a **sufficient condition** for personal identity. The No Fission cases are **easy** (setting aside Williams's alleged paradox). Everybody knows what to say about such cases. So the account needs to say what happens in other kinds of cases.

Parfit knows this:

We need to say something more. If we admit that psychological continuity might not be one-one, we need to say what we ought to do if it were not one-one. Otherwise our account would be open to the objections that it is incomplete and arbitrary. (pp. 13-4)

### (c) Parfit's Answer:

I have suggested that if psychological continuity took a branching form, we ought to speak in a new way, regarding what we describe [*i.e.*, psychological continuity] as having the same significance as identity. This answers these objections. (p. 14)

Parfit: "Stop talking about personal identity!"

## 6. OBJECTION: Changing the Subject:

This **does not answer** the objections, or at least not the **incompleteness** objection. what we need to know is: who, if anyone, is  $A$ ? We aren't told the answer to that question. We are told that we should change the subject.

**DIALECTIC:**

**Q:** Who, if anyone, is  $A$ ?

**PARFIT:** That's not important. What's important is who is psychologically continuous with *A*. And, in our case, both  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  are, so *A* survives as both.

**COMPARE:**

**YOUR BOYFRIEND:** Where were you last night, and who were you with?

**YOU:** That's not important. What's important is how much I respect you and care about you.

This isn't a way of answer the question. It's a way of **not answering the question**.

7. **OBJECTION: Is Parfit's position coherent?** The claim is, more or less, that there is no answer to the question, "Who's *A*?" in our fission case. How does this square with the idea that only three answers ("both", "neither", "one of them") are possible? It seems that that **one** of those three answers has to be correct. Denying all of them seems incoherent.

There are cases in which we think a question has no answer: Someone asks you: "Did you serve time for your most recent felony conviction?"

But these are always cases in which the question seems to presuppose something false. There seems to be **no such presupposition** in the question regarding personal identity.

8. **NOTE:** The fragility objections still apply.