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).

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 appear to give incoherent results when applied to fission cases.

   Parfit: “Fission cases present a problem independently of any commitment to Psych.”

   There are only three possibilities in a fission case:

   (a) A does not survive.
   (b) A survives as either \(A_1\) or \(A_2\).
   (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)

   An alternative way of making out (C): A survives as a person with a “divided mind”: A person (A) who has two other persons (\(A_1\) and \(A_2\)) as parts.

   Another Alternative: \(A_1\) and \(A_2\) 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 Partfit’s View of Personal Identity?

(a) **No Fission Cases:**

\[ X \text{ and } Y \text{ are the same person if they are psychologically continuous and there is no person who is contemporary with either and psychologically continuous with the other. (p. 13)} \]

(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:

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

(c) **Partfit’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 A₁ and A₂ 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.