

Sixth Handout

Parfit's Reasons and Persons (V)

Reductionism is hard to believe. Likewise its alleged consequence that replication is as good as ordinary survival. But Buddha did it, says Parfit, and so can we. How should our attitudes change? The Extreme Claim (307) says that assuming Reductionism, there is no reason to be specially concerned about our own futures.

Parfit grants that a Non-Reductionist could reasonably accept this. Learning there is no further fact, they may decide to live for the moment. But more plausible, he thinks, is the Moderate Claim (311): There is reason to be specially concerned about our R-descendants, identical to us or not.

Concern can be apportioned in more than one way. Earlier in the book Parfit discusses the Self-Interest theory, which involves a

Requirement of Equal Concern

A rational person should be equally concerned about all parts of his future.

How should this be modified if we are Reductionists? One idea is that we should be equally concerned about all parts of our R-descendants' futures. Even R-descendants living thousands of years hence?

Not according to Parfit. He thinks connectedness matters over and above continuity: "since connectedness is nearly always weaker over longer periods, I can rationally care less about my further future" (313). Is Parfit right that it can be rational to act against one's own long-term self interest?

What should a Reductionist say about desert -- getting what "you" are owed, whether punishment or reward? What should a Reductionist say about the force of personal commitments? Example: A young Russian with socialist ideals intends to give his land to the peasants. He knows his ideals may fade and so asks his wife 'Promise me that if I ever change my mind, and ask you to revoke this document, you will not consent' (327). He considers his ideals essential to him and asks her to think of his corrupt middle aged self as a different person. What as a Reductionist should she do when the fateful day arrives?

A popular ethical view is Utilitarianism. It holds that we should act so as to maximize the overall well-being ("happiness") of humankind. Does that mean we should deprive ourselves to improve the lives of others, regardless of who has more to begin with? Some say not because they accept a

Principle of Equality

A fairer distribution of goods is other things equal a better distribution.

Parfit holds that as Reductionists we should give the Principle of Equality less weight in our moral thinking. Since personal identity is not deep, neither are the distinctions

between people. We should "focus less upon the person, the subject of experiences, and instead ...focus on the experiences themselves...just as we are right to ignore whether people come from the same or different nations, we are right to ignore whether experiences come from the same or different lives" (341).

He concludes: Reductionism supports "several changes in our beliefs about both rationality and morality. There are other changes that I have not discussed. The effect on our emotions may be different for different people. For those who accept the Extreme Claims, the effects may be disturbing...I find the truth liberating, and consoling. It makes me less concerned about my own future, and my death, and more concerned about others. I welcome this widening in my concern" (347).