

Fifth Handout

Parfit's Reasons and Persons (IV)

So far, we have seen an argument for the claim that "identity is not what matters". That involved a case (fission) where identity was lost, but "R with its normal cause" was not lost (of course we get R with its normal cause twice over), and nothing of intrinsic value (supposedly) was lost. The conclusion was that identity--one's survival--is not of intrinsic value. But what *is* of intrinsic value? Some answers:

- (a) R with its normal cause
- (b) R with any cause
- (c) R (even without any cause)
- (d) Not even R (the Extreme Claim--see Parfit, 307-12)

Parfit's view (although he has some sympathy with (d)) appears to be that (b) is the right answer: "In our concern about our own future, *what fundamentally matters is relation R, with any cause*" (287).

Parfit realizes this leads to counterintuitive results in some cases, but thinks contrary intuitions dissipate when we more fully assimilate the truth about what we are. Here are some problematic looking cases with Parfit's actual or possible attempts at dissipation.

Teletransportation

Teletransportation is (it seems) ill-named, like the Holy Roman Empire. It is not a method of *transportation* at all. We can see this intuitively as follows. Consider a photocopier. The *original* does not come out in the tray at the end of the copier--the *copy* does that, with the *original* remaining on the glass. Suppose now that the copier's light instantly vaporizes the paper on the glass, but (as before) something that looks very much like the original flops into the tray. Is it the original? Surely not--no more than the sheet in the tray is the original in the case of a normal photocopier. And isn't teletransportation analogous to photocopying with the original being destroyed? Poor Kirk--he died many years ago, when he first stepped into the transporter! The psychological criterion (non-branching R with the normal cause) agrees with intuition: in teletransportation the causal process that produces someone on Mars who is R-related to you is highly abnormal.

Still, is teletransportation to be feared? Not according to Parfit, for the following reason: "It cannot matter much that the cause is abnormal. It is the *effect* which matters" (286). He supports this with the analogy of vision. You might at first think it a great loss to lose your eyes; but not if you were at the same time provided with an alternative basis for vision.

Doesn't this beg the question? Effects are not always what matters; causes can matter too, as for example it matters whether someone has failed to call because they lost your number or because they have no interest in seeing you. Parfit is inviting us to compare R to vision. But he doesn't say why we shouldn't rather compare it to other phenomena where the cause matters very much.

The Branch-Line Case

This is teletransportation that destroys the original a short time after producing the replica (287). You are on the "branch-line". Your replica is on Mars. You know you will die in a few hours. Is it rational to be worried?

Not according to Parfit. He supports this with the example of *The Sleeping Pill*. Some such pills put you to sleep in an hour; you wake up remembering the first half of that hour but not the second. Here I am lying in bed in the second half of the hour. Don't I care egoistically about the person who wakes up, even though his psychological connections are only to my half-hour-ago self?

Again one can wonder if this is the only potential analogy, and if they all point the same way. For that matter, why not correct our intuition in the sleeping pill case by means of our feelings about the branch-line case? Consistency may require us to treat them alike, but there is more than one way of doing that; one can modify either judgment.

Murder while Asleep

The Mad Scientist comes into your bedroom while you are sound asleep, at 12am. She scans your body, producing a physical replica of you, into the brain of which is downloaded your complete (quasi-) psychology. By 3am the process is completed. You are still asleep, but now your replica sleeps beside you. Just before you wake, a lethal injection is administered at 8am, and your body is removed to be incinerated. Your replica savours a bowl of Cheerios at 8.30.

Murder while Asleep is a kind of Branch-Line Case. So Parfit should say that nothing of value has been lost. He could perhaps argue that if you knew the mad scientist was to do these things, you would not be anywhere near as much bothered; the analogy with Branch-Line would be pretty tight. Shouldn't one uphold the better-informed judgment against the less-informed one?

Duplication by Coincidence

A replica of you might be produced by coincidence, just as someone might (improbably) paint a replica of the Mona Lisa without ever having seen or heard of it. Such a replica would be R-related to you, but with *no* cause. Parfit argues that it doesn't matter if the cause is *unreliable*, by giving an analogy with an unreliable cure for a disease: all that matters is that it works (287). But of course all that really matters is that you recover, not that the treatment has *caused* you to recover. If the treatment was ineffective, but you

recover anyway, that's just as good as the treatment causing you to recover. So, if this analogy is appropriate, it appears that Parfit should have chosen (c) rather than (b).

A variant of the above. The background situation is just the same as in the Branch-Line Case, but you never step into the teletransporter. You learn that you will shortly die. But you also discover that on Mars they have been experimenting with producing people using replication-technology, but entirely at random (no originals are copied), and by some incredible fluke, a replica of you has been produced. So this is the Branch-Line Case with no cause. If (c) is right, you should be completely reassured to learn about your replica: this is just as good as survival.

Another variant. You learn you have a randomly produced replica. One of you is to be sent off on a highly dangerous mission. Is it reasonable to prefer strongly that your replica is chosen? Not if (c) is correct.

Question: Parfit argues that if case X is analogous in many respects to case Y, then it is irrational to value the outcome in one more than that in the other. He thinks this is especially so if X and Y differ only in "trivial details," like whether one Replica materializes slightly before another. Is he right? Why should significance (and its opposite) flow up from the details, rather than the details acquiring significance from the higher-level phenomena that they subserve? More tendentiously, perhaps, if in fact we do prefer the X-outcome, why should we need to provide reasons? Aren't some preferences brute = not further justifiable?