

Class Seven: Parfit On Personal Identity and Survival

Philosophy and Science Fiction - Ryan Simonelli

October 19, 2022

1 Parfit on Personal Identity

- **The Case of Brain Splitting:** Parfit considers the following case, owed to David Wiggins:
 - It is actually possible to have whole hemisphere of one's brain removed and go on to live (basically) normal life. This has actually been successfully done in patients with severe seizures.
 - We suppose that a brain transplant is possible, where the brain of one person is removed and put into the body of another.
 - We can then imagine someone who has their brain split, with each half being removed and put into a new body.

What do we say about personal identity in such a case?

- **Three Possibilities:** Suppose I undergo such a procedure, with my brain being split and each half placed into a new body. It seems that there are three possibilities here:
 - **Possibility One:** I do not survive.
 - * This seems unreasonable, given that we think that, in the case where just one of the hemisphere's was retained (with the other simply removed), I'd survive. "How could a double success be a failure?"
 - **Possibility Two:** I survive as one of the two people.
 - * This seems unreasonable, since it seems that we have no grounds on which we can pick one person rather than the other.
 - **Possibility Three:** I survive as both.
 - * This implies that the two products of the operation are really both *me*, and so are the same person (perhaps different "branches" of me), but at least in this case, this seems implausible (Parfit considers a different case—the split exam case—in which it is more plausible).
- **Parfit's Proposal:** Disentangle the notion of *survival* from the notion of *identity* so as to maintain that I survive as *both* of the two products of the operation, while being identical to *neither* of them.

What Really Matters in Identity: The reason we care about personal identity is because identity implies psychological continuity, but it's really this other thing—*psychological continuity*—that we care about, and it need not imply identity (and it does not in cases of branching).

2 Reconstructing the Lockean Account

- **The Problem with Locke's Account:** Locke's account of personal identity crucially relied on the notion of *memory*, which, as we've seen, presupposes personal identity.
 - Apparent memories are only really *memories* insofar as the actions and thoughts that they are memories of are *my* memories and thoughts.

- **Parfit's Resolution:** We can define a notion of memory—call it “*quasi-memory*” or “*q-memory*” for short—that plays the same role but which doesn't presuppose personal identity.
- **Q-Memories:** I am *q*-remembering an experience just in case
 1. I have a belief about a past experience which seems in itself like a memory belief.
 2. Someone did have such an experience
 3. My belief is causally dependent upon this experience in the right kind of way.
- **Q-Memories and Memories:** The concept of *q*-memory is wider than that of memory. Memories are just *q*-memories that I have of *my* experiences. But I can *q*-remember the experiences of people who are not identical to me.
- **The Right Kind of Causation?:** It's not exactly clear how to specify the “right kind” of causation, but, intuitively, in any case where the Lockean talk of “extending consciousness back” will be a case in which the causation is the right kind.

- **Compare with Action:** What is an action? Plausibly, it's an event that's caused by beliefs and desires. But not just any event caused by one's beliefs and desires will do; one's beliefs and desires must cause the event *in the right way*. Consider a case from Donald Davidson:

“A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never chose to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally,”
(Davidson, 1973)

I'm inclined to think that any account along these lines is going to be circular, but we can bracket these worries for our present purposes.

- **Applying this Idea to Total Recall:** The two scenarios we considered last class don't count as *q*-memories
 - **1 without 2 or 3:** I get memories of implanted of a trip to Mars that never happened, so no one had the experiences I seem to remember.
 - **1 and 2 without 3:** I get memories implanted at Rekal of Napoleon's victory at Toulon, from the perspective of Napoleon. We can suppose that Napoleon gave detailed descriptions of his experience in the battle, which were recorded by historians, and known by the people who worked at Rekal Inc. So, not only did someone have these experiences, but these the apparent memories *are* causally dependent on these experiences. However, they're not dependent *in the right kind of way*. So (3) doesn't hold.
- **Applying this Idea to Moon:** Plausibly, in the case of *Moon* Sam₅ (and Sam₆'s) experiences *are* dependent on Sam₀'s experiences in the right kind of way.
 - **Some Substantiation:** Just as, if you replace my neurons with alternates one by one my memory beliefs will still bear the right sort of causal relation to the experiences they are memory of, Since Sam₅'s brain is a perfect duplicate of Sam₀'s, his beliefs are causally dependent on Sam₀'s experiences in the right kind of way. That's why it seems right to use Locke's phrase of “extending consciousness back” in this case, whereas it doesn't in the Napoleon case

So, right before Sam₅ dies, both Sam₅ and Sam₆ are *q-remembering* asking Tess out for a date, but they're not *remembering* asking Tess out on a date, since the person who actually did that was Sam₀, who's identical to neither of them.

- **Question (from John McDowell):** Is the idea of a *q*-memory independently intelligible, as a reductionist conception of personal identity supposes it to be? After all, it is defined in part, as something that *seems like a memory belief*, and so it appeals to the concept of memory, which presupposes personal identity, in being defined. Is there a way to define it without any such appeal?

- Even if we give up the reductionist conception of personal identity, the concept of a *q*-memory still might be helpful to making sense of what's going on in these cases and guiding our conception of what we should do if we were to find ourselves in them.
- **Psychological Continuity, Reconstructed:** The sort of psychological continuity that matters to us can be understood in terms of concepts like *q*-memory, *q*-intention, and so on, which do not presuppose personal identity.

3 The Teletransporter and the Two Possibilities Argument

- **Teletransportation:** Consider again the case of teletransportation:

There is a device that can “transport” you from one place to another, say, from Earth to the Moon. The way it works, however, is by scanning you for all the information about your body and brain, then vaporizing your body, completely destroying it in an instance, then beaming the information over to a transporter on the Moon where your body and brain are reconstructed, molecule from molecule, from a vat of organic matter on the Moon.

If what matters to survival is psychological continuity, then there should be nothing stopping one from entering the teletransporter.

- **Two Possibilities:** Suppose I am convinced by Parfit that “being destroyed and Replicated is about as good as ordinary survival,” and so I agree to go into the teletransporter. Considering my own experience and its continuation as I walk in, it seems that there are two possibilities:
 1. I walk into the teletransporter, I hear the whirring of the machine as it scans me and heats up to vaporize me, I feel a slight heat, and then . . . nothing. No memories, no thoughts, nothing it is like, no blackness, no boredom, just *nothing*: death.
 2. I walk into the teletransporter, I hear the whirring of the machine as it scans me and heats up to vaporize me, I feel a slight heat, and then . . . I open my eyes to look around at the space station in the moon. I can see the craters out the window. I breath a sigh of relief. I made it. I survived.

The idea that there really are two such possibilities can be made vivid by the following case.

- **The Branch Line Case:** We now imagine a case in which the destructing part of the mechanism *fails*. I walk in, preparing to be transported to the Moon, but when they scan me, nothing happens. Someone walks out shortly after and says, “I’m terribly sorry. Your information has been scanned and sent to the Moon, where you’ve been perfectly reconstructed, healthy and well. It’s just that the vaporizer has been faulty lately. It hasn’t vaporized you on the spot like it’s supposed to. However, though you can’t feel it yet, it’s still done irreparable damage to your internal organs, and you can expect to die in a few days.” It seems, in this case, *that I’m going to die*. Am I really to be reassured by the fact that there’s a replica of me with my memories on the Moon? Yet, if this seems bad, why would it be any worse than the standard teletransportation case. What difference could a slight delay in destruction make?
- **Two Possibilities Again:** Suppose now that, still convinced by Parfit, I knowingly enter into a teletransporter whose vaporizer is broken in the way described above.
 1. **Unlucky:** I walk into the teletransporter, I hear the whirring of the machine as it scans me and heats up to vaporize me, I feel a slight heat, and then . . . nothing. I’m right where I was, on Earth, without having been transported to the Moon. I’m in the unlucky possibility—I’m still on Earth, my body’s been damaged by the broken vaporizer, and going to die in a few days.
 2. **Lucky:** I walk into the teletransporter, I hear the whirring of the machine as it scans me and heats up to vaporize me, I feel a slight heat, and then . . . I open my eyes to look around at the space station in the Moon. I can see the craters out the window. I’m the in the lucky possibility—I’m on the Moon and healthy.

It seems perfectly reasonable for me, walking into the teletransporter, to wonder *what possibility will I find myself in: the lucky one or the unlucky one?*

- **Parfit's Counter-intuitive Commitment, Once Again:** Though it *seems* reasonable for me to ask this question, as I walk into the teletransporter, it is, in fact, confused. The question presupposes that there is an *answer* to the question of personal identity over time in this case: that *I* will find myself in one possibility, the other, neither, or both. But, on Parfit's view, the concept of personal identity just stops applying here, so there's no answer to this question. We should instead ask about survival, but in such a way that does not presuppose identity, maintaining that the relation I bear to both the person in the unlucky possibility and the person in the lucky possibility qualifies as "survival" even though it's wrong to say that it's *me* who survives as either. This is a hard idea to get one's head around.