

Derek Parfit's Concept of Personal Identity and its Implications on Rationality and Morality

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Contents

I.	Introduction	2
II.	Personal Identity	2
1.	What We Believe Ourselves To Be	2
2.	How We Are Not What We Believe	5
a.	Unity of Consciousness and the Subject of Experiences	5
b.	PI as a Matter of Degree	7
3.	Why Our Identity Is Not What Matters	9
III.	Implications Of Reductionism	11
1.	Changes in our Attitude towards Life	11
2.	Rationality	12
3.	Morality	12
4.	Conclusions	14
IV.	Discussion	14
1.	SOEs and Unity of Consciousness	15
2.	Parfit's Attitude towards Human Rationality and Morality	16
V.	Conclusions	17
VI.	Appendix	18
	Abbreviations and Definitions	18
	Bibliography	18

I. Introduction

Within his large work “Reasons and Persons”, Derek Parfit drafts a concept of Personal Identity examining the questions concerning what a person is and in what a person’s existence over time consists. Thereby, he intends to prove *Reductionism* to be the sole logically coherent reconstruction of reality and thus should provide the fundamental Theory X of morality and rationality his whole work is aimed at.

In the following, I will reconstruct Parfit’s argumentation and its implications on rationality and morality, presented in Part Three “Personal Identity”, before discussing some questions raised by his point of view. This essay concentrates on chapter ten to twelve, as they introduce the theory of Reductionism, fourteen and fifteen which present Parfit’s conclusions concerning morality and rationality.

II. Personal Identity

1. What We Believe Ourselves To Be

To introduce his main questions about the nature of a person and of identity over time, Parfit gives a science-fictional example¹. The consideration of mere imaginary cases will encourage us to take an intuitive position regarding the question, as to whether two people at two different times are *one and the same* (oats.) person, since our beliefs about ourselves become most explicit when considering imaginary cases (200)². Some of these “natural beliefs” are shown to be relying upon false assumptions. By analysing and correcting them Parfit wants to argue in favour of his understanding of a person’s existence and to present its implications on morality.

First, two kinds of identity are differentiated: *Numerical identity* which means to be oats., and *qualitative identity*, a synonym of exact similarity. The question of what characterises PI o. t. as well as our concern about our future chiefly refer to numerical identity though this might be influenced by changes in qualitative identity.

Approaching his central questions “What is the nature of a person?” and “What is it that makes a person at two different times oats. person?”, Parfit at first gives two criteria to answer the latter as by doing so he can provide parts of an answer to the first (202).

¹ Compare the example of Teletransportation, section 75.

² All page numbers refer to Derek Parfit: *Reasons and Person*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984.

The *Physical Criterion* (ΦK) focuses on the physical persistence of a person, namely the spatio-temporal continuity of his brain and body. This means, that there is a continuous line between the past and the present person and that at each point there was a person whose existence was partly caused by the existence of the immediately preceding person. *Physical continuity* (ΦC) includes states, in which only the components³ of a whole exist, and the replacement of certain components with exactly similar spares.

Parfit concludes

The Physical Criterion [204]: (1) What is necessary is [...] the continued existence of *enough* of the brain [...]. *X* today is oats. person as *Y* at some past time iff (2) enough of *Y*'s brain continued to exist, and is now *X*'s brain, and (3) there does not exist a different person who also has enough of *Y*'s brain. (4) PI o. t. just consists in the holding of facts like (2) and (3).

On a psychological level, Parfit differentiates two possibilities of explaining identity o. t.: either there is a certain mental entity (like a Cartesian Ego) whose continuity resembles ΦC , or PI o. t. rather consists in *psychological continuity* (ΨC), an overlapping chain of connections between certain psychological features⁴. These can principally hold to different extents; whereas psychological connectedness involves only some particular direct connections whereas ΨC is constituted by overlapping chains of strong connectedness (206).

Whereas strong (direct) connectedness lacks transitivity and therefore cannot be itself a criterion of PI o. t., ΨC provides PI o. t. because of its overlapping connections⁵.

Analogous to ΦK , there is

The Psychological Criterion [ΨK , p. 207]: (1) There is ΨC iff there are overlapping chains of strong connectedness. *X* today is oats. person as *Y* at some past time iff (2) *X* is psychologically continuous with *Y*, (3) this continuity has the right kind of cause, and (4) there does not exist a different person who is also psychologically continuous with *Y*. (5) PI o. t. just consists in the holding of facts like (2) to (4).

The "right kind of cause" mentioned in sentence (3) could be any cause.

Later it will be shown, why Parfit includes requirements (3) and (4) on ΦK as well as (4) and (5) on the ΨK , the specification of (3) is necessary to cover Parfit's imaginary examples.

³ E. g. a wooden ship whose components are exchanged from time to time (203).

⁴ Hereby Parfit revises John Locke's concept that direct memory is the main constituent of PI o. t., compare p. 205.

⁵ Direct connectedness means the holding of direct connections between two persons at two points t^1 (today) and t^2 (at some past time), and between t^2 and t^3 (even further in the past) without concluding that there are the same connections between t^1 and t^3 . In contrast, overlapping chains of connectedness exactly imply this conclusion.

Having found these criteria to be essential features of PI o. t., this is explained as involving only a number of particular facts which can be described impersonally, i. e. neither ascribing them to a particular person nor presupposing this person's existence. This impersonality which is characteristic of the *Reductionist View* Parfit supports cannot even be affected if in describing the *contents* of a particular thought a person is mentioned⁶ (210).

In contrast to Reductionism another view of PI o. t. is sketched, and vehemently disputed throughout the following discussion. On *Non-Reductionism*, PI consists in a "further fact" (210) beyond ΦC or ΨC , i. e. an ideal entity which exists detached from provable facts. Most of Parfit's attacks against this view aim at the Cartesian understanding of *separately existing entities* (SEEs) as pure mental substances, although moderate theories of a further fact are dismissed in the same way.

Instead, a person's existence

"just consists in the existence of a brain and body, and the occurrence of a series of interrelated physical and mental events" [211],

and therefore, despite of the actual existence of persons,

"a *complete* description of reality [can be given] *without* claiming that persons exist" [212]⁷.

There is some importance laid upon this way of describing reality impersonally assuming that by the description of the constituents of a person's existence this is already implicitly included, and that an additional mention of this person would be redundant.

Beyond impersonality, a second important consequence of Reductionism is that PI can sometimes be *indeterminate*⁸: The question, if a person at two different times is oats. person cannot always be answered by "Yes" or "No", though all relevant circumstances can be completely described. Parfit calls such a kind of question *empty*, i. e. concerning a certain process there is only *one* outcome to consider, differences in descriptions are merely different interpretations of the same facts. If we now choose one answer, this choice will be arbitrarily set without any plausible reasons⁹.

⁶ The reference of persons within thoughts does not imply their existence, to refuse self-referential thoughts (in First-Person-Mode) to be an indicator of the thinker's identity with the contained person, Parfit establishes the concept of quasi-memory (220 ff.).

⁷ One of Parfit's favourite analogies to the nature of persons is the nature of nations only including actual facts such as citizens or a certain territory.

⁸ Indeterminacy assumes requirements 4 on ΦC and 5 on ΨC , meaning the lack of SEEs.

⁹ Applied to PI, this means that, in case of merely reduced holding of ΨC , the question if a particular person "survives" (= is still oats.) a certain development cannot be plausibly answered. Compare the re-establishment of clubs (213 f.).

Thus, Parfit disproves PI to be the feature “what matters” (215) considering a person’s persistent existence, but proposes another one to serve this purpose, namely

What matters is *Relation R* [215]: psychological connectedness and/or continuity with the right kind of cause [i. e. *any* cause].

One further Reductionist implication upon the nature of persons is delayed, namely the ascription of different experiences at one time and throughout a whole life to one single person, or: how to explain the unity of consciousness? (217).

Summarising his arguments, Parfit claims that there are only two alternatives explaining PI o. t. and the nature of a person: Reductionism or the belief in SEEs. If we assume that our existence involves an SEE, we have to consider PI to be determinate and to be what matters in “surviving” throughout time. Furthermore, the unity of different mental events constituting consciousness is explained by ownership¹⁰.

On the contrary, if Reductionism provides the true explanation of reality, PI cannot always be determinate. Considering existence o. t. and the unity of consciousness, the focus lies on Relation R or on the relations between different experiences coherently to the claim that reality can be described impersonally.

In the following chapters Parfit intends to reject some objections to the Reductionist View, arguing in favour of his theory in more detail, and to examine the implications of Reductionism on our “natural beliefs”, thus giving reasons for the need to change our moral understanding.

2. How We Are Not What We Believe

a. Unity of Consciousness and the Subject of Experiences

Parfit continues his examination of what we are by focussing on the unity of consciousness, especially on the relation between PI and ΨC , or consciousness.

¹⁰ i. e. we can integrate different simultaneous experiences into one consciousness *because* they are had by oats. person.

To support his claim $PI \rightarrow \Psi C$, he has to reject an objection to Reductionism expressed in Butler's¹¹ assumption that psychological events, when experienced as being had by a specific person, already presuppose PI ($\Psi C \rightarrow PI$) and therefore cannot be its necessary constituent.

A first interpretation of this assertion might be that our concept of mental events is basically self-referential, i. e. the person having a certain experience is identical with the person contained in this experience (230).

But Parfit rejects the reliability of the perception of mental events as one's own experiences, as being a false assumption, creating for this purpose a concept of psychological quasi-experiences (concrete: quasi-memory). These include not only a person's own experiences, but may even include some experiences of other people¹² – therefore, the identity of the person having the mental event and the person who is mentioned in its contents cannot be deduced through the experience of having a particular mental event itself. As psychological life consists in a large variety of experiences the unity of this person's must be selective: ΨC just holds if there is an overlapping chain of strong connections between certain experiences, otherwise these experiences refer to other people. Thus, ΨC does not presuppose the identity of the *experiencing* person and the person *contained* by these experiences and can be a constituent of PI¹³.

Now Parfit makes an interesting statement by admitting (1) that people exist and (2) that a person can be called a *subject of experiences* (SOE) as these are had by somebody, but this is based merely on “the way in which we talk” (223).

Nevertheless, the awareness of a subject of experiences is discarded because its distinct continuous existence is unlikely – an SEE itself might be just a series of connected SEEs. Thus, we cannot be sure that in referring to such an entity we are indeed referring to our continuous selves¹⁴ and should therefore be inclined not to distinguish “awareness of the continuity of an SOE” from “awareness of ΨC ” (224).

Neither are we allowed to deduce an SEE from our experiences: Parfit follows Lichtenberg's objection¹⁵ to Descartes' most famous conclusion. From the specific mental event “thinking” itself, no existence of a thinking subject can be inferred unless we merely

¹¹ Compare p. 219. Parfit refers to Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion*, first Appendix, 1736.

¹² E. g. memories in First-Person-Mode surgically transferred into another person's brain.

¹³ A second interpretation of Butler's statement might be that experiences in First-Person-Mode refer to the person's own identity as a subject of his experiences i. e. being aware of himself as an SEE.

¹⁴ An objection to Parfit's example might be that in case of Teletransportation the involved SEE might be continuous, whereas its container has changed.

¹⁵ “Es denkt, sollte man sagen, so wie man sagt, es blitzt” (517), Parfit citing from: Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*, Sudelbucher II, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1971.

ascribe thoughts to thinkers as we do in everyday-language, and even less are we coerced to deduce an SEE, since an impersonal description of mental experiences can report the facts completely (225).

Moreover, even the ascription of thoughts to different thinkers or the mention of different people within these thoughts can be realised impersonally, though in a more complicated way¹⁶:

In the particular life that contains the thinking of the thought that is expressed by the utterance of this sentence, it is thought: ... [226].

Therefore, Parfit considers an impersonal explanation of the unity of a person's life to be most plausible: Even without claiming that experiences are actually had by subjects, "we could describe the interrelations between all of the mental and physical events that together constitute a particular person's life" [226].

b. PI as a Matter of Degree

As there is no plausible reference to an SEE or an SOE considering the identity of one person at two different times, how can we diagnose PI o. t. using the psychological and/or the physical criterion?

Temporarily assuming that his physical state maintains, a person's life throughout a certain period of time basically consists in varied changes in his psychological features. Depending on the importance of these changes, the degree of ΨC can be more or less reduced: This is portrayed by the *Psychological Spectrum* (231 ff.) ranging from full ΨC to no psychological connection at all.

Now we have to decide which degree of holding psychological connections within the spectrum is sufficient to state a person's "survival" throughout the relevant period (231): At the "near end" (almost full ΨC) of the spectrum, the person's "survival"¹⁷ is as obvious as his "death" is at the "far end". Concerning the middle of the spectrum, the crucial point between death and survival is not easy to fix: On the one hand, there are only slight differences in degree between the cases in the spectrum, but on the other hand the difference between survival and death is intuitively supposed to be significant. Thus, the decision up to which percentage of psychological connections PI is granted must be taken arbitrarily without any

¹⁶ The natural use of personal pronouns just seems to serve simplification of every-day language.

¹⁷ Survival means that the person remains oats. throughout the period, he is *identical* at both times whereas "death" assumes merely a few connections left

plausible reasons. Consequently, a person's identity in the middle of the spectrum is indeterminate, and the question concerning his survival is empty¹⁸.

Analogously, there are different degrees of ΦC , created e. g. by replacing a certain number of cells with qualitatively identical copies, which together form the *Physical Spectrum* (234 ff.) providing unambiguous statements on a person's survival near its ends, whereas the cases in the middle of the spectrum remain indeterminate. Assuming that the carrier of ΨC is the brain, the past person is fully psychologically continuous with the present despite of the physical alterations.

According to either of the spectra, the other one of the two relevant criteria for PI is always met, wherefore the complete maintenance of one requirement might seem to provide PI sufficiently (236).

This argument fails when both spectra are fused to the *Combined Spectrum* (236 ff.) involving all of the varying degrees of psychological and physical connectedness. Thus, the outcome at the "far end" does no longer reflect the complete detachment of either the psychological or the physical connections, but establishes instead an entirely distinct person. Drawing a borderline between "death" and "survival" in the middle of the spectrum cannot be plausible¹⁹ since the differences between two cases are as trivial as those in each of the single spectra.

Taking the Reductionist assumptions regarding the existence of a person²⁰ and the carrier of his psychological features²¹ into account, the Combined Spectrum proves the claim that a person's identity is not always determinate. Thus, the concept of PI has to be enlarged (240) to cover the cases in the middle of the Combined Spectrum abolishing the necessity of a borderline which – arbitrarily drawn – cannot reasonably have any moral or rational significance anyway²².

This conclusion has first significant consequences for our attitude towards PI o. t.: Since the fact that PI is not always determinate conflicts with the belief that PI is what matters for

¹⁸ The outcome of the process, namely the degree to which ΨC holds, can be described without making a statement on his identity.

¹⁹ Without claiming the existence of a "further fact" or SEE.

²⁰ A person's existence "just consists in the existence of a brain and body, and the occurrence of a series of interrelated physical and mental events" [211].

²¹ i. e. the brain.

²² 241. After all, Parfit still aims to examine exactly the relation between a coherent concept of PI and morality/rationality.

our continuous existence, this belief should be abandoned in favour of Reductionism claiming Relation R to be what matters and denying the existence of a further fact, and the determination of PI in every case (241).

3. Why Our Identity Is Not What Matters

Subsequent to his rejection of the determination of PI, Parfit intends the final refutation of three Non-Reductionist presumptions, namely the unity of consciousness, the belief in SEEs, and the claim that the degree of PI o. t. is significant regarding our permanent existence and our concepts of rationality and morality.

For this purpose, he contemplates the equal division of a person's consciousness in two streams, each of them fully psychologically continuous with the person's previous united consciousness (245 ff.).

If the unity of consciousness is explained by its SOE, the scenario of the division of a person's mind into two equal streams of consciousness must imply that there are two distinct SOEs related at o. t. time to o. t. person – which is regarded as being implausible²³ and thereby additional empirical²⁴ evidence against claiming SOE to be the crucial constituent of PI (249).

In contrast, a Reductionist simply describes the unity of consciousness through several experiences being co-conscious, i. e. being had at o. t. time, without laying importance to the – possibly different – subjects they belong to (250).

According to Parfit's view, subjects in fact only exist because we create them by ascribing experiences to something having these experiences, but they are necessary, neither for describing persons nor for explaining their lives' unity.

On the contrary, he claims that unity of experiences does not exist *if* they are had within a particular person's life, but that these experiences belong to a particular person's life *if* they are specially related²⁵ (252).

The case of dividing merely a person's consciousness only provides further counter-evidence against the belief in SEEs whereas applying to the ΦC the person's identity o. t. is

²³ One person cannot plausibly be two persons for a certain time, and as the person before the division is not one of the two SOEs during the time of division, this scenario must either include even three SOEs, or there must be SOEs that are not persons (250).

²⁴ Compare p.245: the consequences of cerebral surgery for perception and consciousness.

²⁵ Therefore: not L (common life) \rightarrow U (unity), but U \rightarrow L.

not affected and still can be considered to be the deciding criterion in diagnosing his continued existence.

This claim is challenged by Parfit's next example: the transplantation of an equally split brain into two identical bodies (section 89, p. 253 ff.). As Relation R is holding between the previous person Y and either present person X to the same extent, the question as to who of both X is identical with Y is empty²⁶, the outcome can be described as "two future people, each of whom [...] fully psychologically continuous with" the past person (260). Thus, the case of division argues that ΨC does not presuppose PI, too, since it is not possible that both X are identical with Y despite of being fully psychologically connected with him (261)²⁷.

What are the reactions to this case? Parfit regards Y's division as being "as good as ordinary survival" (261) since the only obstacle to state Y's PI o. t. is his duplication whereas the ΨK as well as the ΦK is perfectly met. The main reason for intuitive suspicion against valuing the division case positively consists in the conflict between duplication and the "natural" concept respectively the original meaning of "identity".

Therefore, Parfit concludes, PI cannot be the crucial feature when being concerned about one's own future, it is rather Relation R which matters because it does not require a one-to-one relation between X today and Y at some past time compared with PI consisting in the *unique* holding of Relation R: $PI = R + U$ (263)²⁸. For R expressing the "intrinsic nature" (263) of the relation between X and Y, R is the more important constituent of PI with U only slightly changing R's value.

Now I will briefly summarise the Reductionist View of existence and identity of persons before reconstructing Parfit's deduction of its implications upon rationality and morality.

According to the Reductionist View, persons indeed do exist, distinct from their brains and bodies, and experiences, though they are not SEEs: A person's *existence* only consists in a particular brain and body, and a series of mental and physical events.

Thus, *Personal Identity over time* just consists in ΨC and ΦC in a one-to-one form and therefore is unlikely to be the feature which matters in a person's permanent existence.

²⁶ This time, the emptiness of the question allows a "best description" (260) of the outcome: Y would be neither X, therefore: Y will not survive (259).

²⁷ This example proves the necessity of requirements 3 on ΦK and 4 on ΨK .

²⁸ U describes the fact of a one-to-one relation.

Unity of Consciousness is explained by the ΨC as one state of being aware of different simultaneous mental events, the *Subject of Experiences* depending upon the relation between these experiences (and not vice versa).

As there is no SEE, the carrier of ΨC is the brain whose ΦC can be reduced to any degree.

Proved by the *Psychological*, the *Physical*, and the *Combined Spectrum*, PI is not always *determinate*, and the decision whether a person X today is oats. as a person Y at some past time sometimes is an arbitrary answer to an *empty question*.

Though our “natural beliefs” in determination and importance of identity are disproved by Reductionism on an abstract level which allows the conclusion that the mere holding of Relation R without any uniqueness is as good as ordinary survival, Parfit himself admits that it is “hard to believe” and he himself “would never lose [his] intuitive belief in the Non-Reductionist View” (280).

III. Implications Of Reductionism

After introducing Reductionism, Parfit presents some implications which this view of PI provides regarding our attitudes towards life, and our concepts of rationality and morality.

1. Changes in our Attitudes towards Life

Parfit pathetically claims the “Liberation from the Self” (281), meaning that since there is no SEE included in a person’s permanent existence and PI is not what matters, the anxiety about one’s own future diminishes. Moreover, death and the separateness of people partly lose their importance because the consideration of the future merely focuses on *relations* ignoring questions on the persistence of persons. Therefore, a certain similarity of relations between a present person and his future self on the one hand, and between the same person and another present person on the other hand can be stated, and the difference between two persons is reduced.

Death itself only indicates the ceasing of certain relations, namely Relation R, whereas less deep indirect relations to this person still hold, e. g. by memory. Thus, the person loses his quality of an SOE, as he does not exist any longer apart from the contents of other persons’ mental events, but his existence fades away rather slowly instead of having a sharp end (281).

By describing reality completely impersonally as constituted by varied relations, a person can adopt a more objective view of his future which allows him to renounce some of his concern and to maintain calmness presently.

2. Rationality

According to Reductionism, any rational anxiety about the future can only be based on the holding of certain relations, especially Relation R, making any concern about PI o. t. redundant. Thus, Reductionism provides an objection to the rationality of a self-centred attitude towards the future since this presupposes one's own permanent existence (283).

Nevertheless, Parfit either does not favour an extreme concept of rationality rejecting every concern about one's own future self and demanding an indifferent attitude towards life and death (307 ff.). Though he cannot disprove its plausibility, he argues in favour of a moderate concept: If the concept of SEEs being most important is to refuse, the value of Relation R as a motive of agency increases and hence provides enough reason to being specially concerned about a person being R-related to a particular other person²⁹ (311).

In addition to the characteristic of PI being not always determinate and thus failing to be a reliable criterion of rational and moral concepts, the fact that ΨC can hold to different degrees and that as a result the relation to a person's future self can vary in closeness supports another objection to the claim that self-interest is rational. Since self-interest requires a person's equal concern about all the parts of his future (313) it implies equal connection between the present person and all of his future selves, and thus contradicts the relativity of Relation R.

On the contrary, the concern for one's future self should rationally correspond to the degree of connectedness between the present and the future person. Therefore, there is a certain *discount rate* (314) in concern depending upon the degree of connectedness.

3. Morality

The astonishing consequence of this last implication disproves imprudence³⁰ to be always irrational since less concern about more remote future selves can be perfectly justified (section 106). This causes the necessity to extend the scope of morality as rationality fails to provide arguments against imprudence (319).

²⁹ Analogous: The special concern for people being strongly related to oneself (e. g. close relatives).

³⁰ i. e. behaviour which causes later serious harm to oneself in favour of present pleasure.

Common-Sense Morality condemns damaging behaviour towards other people – thus, the easiest way of finding a suitable objection to imprudence is the inclusion of damaging one’s future self, either by arguing that in favour of present pleasures the sum of future suffering is increased or by regarding this future self as a different person (319).

Both arguments justify a certain moral paternalism as “we ought not to do to our future selves what it would be wrong to do to other people” (320), thereby inverting the *Golden Rule*³¹ of Common-Sense Morality.

Just as the amount of concern for one’s future self corresponds to the degree of connectedness according to the discount rate, responsibility and desert for one’s past actions, and, the obligation to hold commitments decrease depending upon increasing remoteness from the past self³².

Considering moral theories, Parfit examines the implications of Reductionism on Distributive Justice, the Principle of Equality, and Utilitarianism; the latter ignoring boundaries between individual lives (331) which is supposed to be supported by Reductionism since there the separateness of single lives also lacks importance.

On the contrary, Distributive Justice and the Principle of Equality are given greater scope (334), but less weight: Since according to the Reductionist View only the relations between different present and/or future persons are taken into account as reliable criteria for moral principles, and, since these relations between a present person and his future self can hold to any reduced degree, the difference between the relations to future selves and to other people diminishes.

This allows us to enlarge the *scope* of these principles by considering not only *present*, but even *future* people in case of distributing benefits and burdens, whose distribution within lives and that between lives become similar (334).

However, distribution may be given less *weight* as the Reductionist “partial disintegration” (336) of persons removes the importance of whether benefits are spread within or between lives, and thus supports the *impersonal* maximisation of the total net sum of benefits ignoring the separateness of people.

Since extending the scope of the distributive principles is outweighed by giving them less or even no weight, Reductionism supports or may even – in respect to its effects – result in Utilitarianism (335).

³¹ Do as you would be done by.

³² Compare sections 108 to 110.

4. Conclusions

From the Reductionist conception of persons and their identity o. t. and the possibility of giving a complete impersonal description of reality, there can be deduced several revisions of our attitude towards life, rationality, and morality.

Considering the *rationality* of actions, the principle of self-interest is proved to be indefensible since it ignores the increasing remoteness of future selves and presupposes an SEE (346 f.). Thus, by restricting the reach of rationality, the scope of morality ought to be extended including certain paternalism in favour of criticising harmful actions against present and future persons (347).

The discount rate of connectedness between a present person and his future self allows us to adjust our judgement concerning responsibility and merit to the degree of connections between the present person and his past self (ibid.).

The *moral* focus is transferred from the person as an SOE to the experiences themselves ignoring the boundaries between different lives they occur in. Therefore, the principles of equal distribution of benefits between or within lives become obsolete enhancing the plausibility of Utilitarianism: By caring less about the SOEs, but more about the quality of experiences (346) the net sum of suffering ought to be minimised (341 f.).

In the best outcome, Reductionism means placing life at a greater remove and thereby giving less concern to one's own future experiences, especially death, encouraging more concern for other people.

IV. Discussion

Parfit presents a complex concept of PI standing in the larger context of his attempt to construct a coherent Theory X³³ which is supposed to be the only reliable basic assumption of Morality.

³³ This is tried in the following part "Future Generations".

Even though his argumentation seems to be coherent, there still remains some uncertainty when reading it which might be rejected by Parfit as belonging to our intuitive aversion to the Reductionist View.

Concretely this uncertainty may be divided into three categories of objections concerning Parfit's *methods*, the consistence of his *concept*, and some of his *arguments*.

1. SOEs and Unity of Consciousness

One of Parfit's major interests consists in the abolishment of SOEs to facilitate an impersonal description of reality which, being a main feature of Reductionism, partly provides his implications on morality. For this purpose, he ties the existence of SOEs to that of SEEs which are alleged to belong to an indefensible point of view, merely our *way of talking* about "subjects"³⁴ is justified as a simplification of the more complex impersonal alternative (e. g. p. 226).

However, experiences can only be claimed to be perceived by one single subject, if they are specially interrelated, i. e. if they meet the ΨK – therefore, reality can be described without mentioning subjects only based on the description of experiences and their interrelations. This reconstructs reality as a huge web of abstract relations between certain events; wherein areas where these relations are cumulated represent the SOEs³⁵. Concerning the function as constituents of persons, SEEs are thereby replaced by a chain of overlapping connections between mental events.

Parfit overlooks that, instead of static mental entities existing separately in the respect that they do not presuppose the existence of persons, he constructs a possibly even more abstract concept of a person's existence: a system of interrelated mental events existing separately from the existence of persons since their description makes the claim that persons exist redundant.

Thus, in rejecting the Non-Reductionist View regarding the detachment of person-constituting features (SEEs) from the person himself, he dislodges an equally abstract

³⁴ He explicitly accepts subjects for this reason (223).

³⁵ Metaphorically we may consider a spider's web including different centres of threads and between them some looser connections.

system³⁶ of certain mental events from their subject thereby doing the very same mistake of providing a merely *objective* view of reality³⁷.

The suggestion that by detaching experiences from their subjects Parfit merely replaces SEEs by SESs could be supported by another consequence of describing reality as a web of relations: There will be equally strong connections between one experience and two different overlapping chains of strong connectedness (i. e. persons). What, if there is not only one, but many experiences equally connected with two of such chains? To which of them do they belong? If they belong to both of them³⁸, are these persons themselves overlapping? If they are, Parfit has to abolish his claim that persons exist even within Reductionism. If they belong to neither person, there will be some experiences existing *separately* from persons.

McDowell draws attention to another way of understanding consciousness which Parfit has not taken into account³⁹: Continuity of consciousness can depend upon the awareness of a persisting subject of experiences without claiming this to refer to an SEE.

On the contrary, a continuous consciousness is *subjectively* perceivable as a permanent feature⁴⁰ a person can identify with referring to it by using First-Person-Mode in speech and thoughts. Thus, by detaching consciousness from its personal context, Reductionism can hardly avoid creating its own SES since self-consciousness⁴¹ can neither be reconstructed independently from its contents nor exist without its subject⁴².

2. Parfit's Attitude towards Human Rationality and Morality

By giving priority to the impersonality of reality when considering the foundation of rationality and morality, their purpose loses clarity since human lives recede into the background of this contemplation.

There remain doubts as to whether a mere impersonal description of reality can provide an impulse to act according to certain principles since the concepts of morality and rationality necessarily refer to the persistent lives of human beings: On the one hand, actions presuppose

³⁶ We could call this a "*separately existing system*" (SES).

³⁷ Compare John McDowell, 'Reductionism and the First Person', p. 233 f.; and Sydney Shoemaker, 'Parfit on Identity', p. 138 f.

³⁸ As according to Reductionism the last question may be empty, these experiences may as well belong to both, or to neither person.

³⁹ Compare John McDowell, 'Reductionism and the First Person', p. 232 ff.

⁴⁰ In this case, "permanent" does *not* mean "static", but means "persisting over time, allowing changes".

⁴¹ The self-perception of a person as a subject.

⁴² McDowell, p. 244.

actors, while on the other hand, it seems debatable that an actor should act independently from an individual context of thoughts concerning other present or future activities⁴³.

Even the Utilitarian principle of increasing the net sum of benefits becomes pointless despite of its impersonal aim when the addressee of these benefits is abolished: Astonishingly, Parfit overlooks the fact that principles of morality and rationality concerning human lives are redundant if they are dislodged from human lives.

This is even less intelligible considering his concept of PI laying so much importance to indeterminacy and relativity. (Why, in this context, does he urgently need an impersonal Theory X as the only universal foundation of moral and rational principles applying to actual personal lives?)

Additionally, Reductionism contains deep mistrust in the natural element of life indicated by Parfit's insisting on the falsity of natural beliefs, and his anxious attempts to reconstruct reality impersonally⁴⁴. Instead, he tries to deduce principles of agency from evidence provided by impossible examples and thereby overestimates the influence reason could have on human attitudes and emotions⁴⁵.

V. Conclusions

In conclusion, Parfit's explanations of the nature of persons and PI o. t. ought to be highly appreciated especially focusing on the relation between the degrees of connectedness between past and present persons since their variability in fact matters regarding certain legislative and moral assumptions.

Nevertheless, Parfit's view lacks plausibility concerning its implications upon morality and rationality since by refusing natural features of actual human life to be worth taking into account, Reductionism fails to draft a theory of agency which is applicable to the actual existence of human beings as rational animals.

⁴³ I follow McDowell, p. 246 ff.

⁴⁴ In rejecting extreme implications on morality (sections 102 and 117), allowing a subject "because of the way in which we talk" (p. 222), and attempting to find a moral substitute for according to Reductionism indefensible principles of rationality Parfit shows in consequence: He hesitates to abolish all intuitive principles at once.

⁴⁵ This becomes even clearer when Parfit admits not to be absolutely convinced by his own theory. Compare p. 280.

VI. Appendix

Abbreviations and Definitions

<i>oats.</i>	one and the same	<i>SOE</i>	Subject Of Experiences
<i>o. t.</i>	over time	<i>U</i>	one-to-one relation
<i>PI</i>	Personal Identity	ΦC	Physical Continuity
<i>R</i>	Relation R	ΦK	Physical Criterion
<i>SEE</i>	Separately Existing Entity	ΨC	Psychological Continuity
<i>SES</i>	Separately Existing System	ΨK	Psychological Criterion

Empty questions: (1) Without an answer: A question concerning a single outcome which can be answered merely arbitrarily. A complete description of all facts can be given without referring to the question. (2) With an answer: This consists in the best of several possible interpretations of one single outcome (260).

The Physical Criterion [204]: (1) What is necessary is [...] the continued existence of *enough* of the brain [...]. *X* today is oats. person as *Y* at some past time iff (2) enough of *Y*'s brain continued to exist, and is now *X*'s brain, and (3) there does not exist a different person who also has enough of *Y*'s brain. (4) *PI o. t.* just consists in the holding of facts like (2) and (3).

The Psychological Criterion [207]: (1) There is psychological continuity iff there are overlapping chains of strong connectedness. *X* today is oats. person as *Y* at some past time iff (2) *X* is psychologically continuous with *Y*, (3) this continuity has the right kind of cause, and (4) there does not exist a different person who is also psychologically continuous with *Y*. (5) *PI o. t.* just consists in the holding of facts like (2) to (4).

Relation R [215]: psychological connectedness and/or continuity with the right kind of cause [i. e. *any* cause].

Survival [231]: a person remains oats. throughout a certain period, i. e. the fact that *X* today is oats. person as *Y* at some past time.

Ordinary Survival: Survival with a normal cause.

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