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The Importance of Identity to Survival: A First Person Worry

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In his landmark article on "Personal Identity," Derek Parfit argues that the notion of personal identity can be prized apart from the notion of survival. He explains that in certain situations, the question of whether or not a person existing now is the same person he was at some time in the past is an empty one.1 Instead of the all-or-none relation of personal identity, what we really care about in terms of our future existence is the degree to which any of our future selves will be related to our present selves. Parfit acknowledges that because personal identity maps onto survival under ordinary circumstances, "the belief that identity is what matters is hard to overcome" (Parfit [1], 206). Making use of his fission and fusion examples, Parfit successfully argues that much of what we value about our persistence over time can be included in a notion of survival that does not presuppose personal identity. However, when reconsidered from the first-person perspective, Parfit’s arguments fail to dissuade us from the belief that personal identity is what matters to us after all.

Parfit argues that what links the various experiences of a single life is something apart from, although usually concurrent with, personal identity. Two types of relations are distinguished by Parfit: psychological connectedness and psychological continuity. Psychological connectedness refers to the degree to which a person X and a person Y share psychological connections such as memories, intentions, and personality traits.2 Psychological

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1A question is empty if we can know everything about what happened under given circumstances without answering the question. The different answers to the question will represent merely different descriptions of the same outcome (Parfit [2], 213-214).
2Parfit introduces the concept that X can be q-related to Y without presupposing that X is identical to Y. For example, X and Y q-remember an event as long as they have apparent
connectedness is not transitive.\textsuperscript{3} Since connectedness is a matter of degree, I may be strongly connected to myself yesterday and fairly weakly connected to myself twenty years ago. Psychological continuity is the holding of overlapping chains of connectedness between one individual and another (Parfit [2] 206).\textsuperscript{4} Psychological continuity is a transitive, all-or-none relation that is not a matter of degree.

Parfit describes our ordinary notion of personal identity as a one-one relation of psychological continuity. With regard to the continued existence of a person over time, it is the natural view that personal identity is what matters.\textsuperscript{5} For Parfit, however, what matters is not personal identity, but rather psychological connectedness. All that we care about in survival is included under psychological connectedness; the one-one and all-or-none requirements of personal identity are simply extra requirements that we will find unimportant (even incoherent) if we examine them more closely.

Our examination begins with Parfit's criticism of the one-one criterion. In David Wiggins' fission case, Brown's brain is divided in half and memories that have the "right sorts of" causal histories; personal identity is not necessary for connectedness to hold.

\textsuperscript{3}For example, following Thomas Reid's example, the old general remembers being (shares psychological connections with) the brave officer who raised the flag, and the brave officer remembers being (shares psychological connections with one who was) flogged as a boy, but the old general does not remember being flogged as a boy. Parfit would say that the general is psychologically connected to the brave officer just as the brave officer is connected to the boy, but that the general is merely psychologically continuous with the boy since they are in no way directly connected.

\textsuperscript{4}See Reid's example (n3 above).

\textsuperscript{5}Parfit's phrasing of "...is what matters" is bothersome because it names no object or person for whom personal identity or survival matters. Perhaps Parfit is intentionally vague in this regard in order to avoid counter arguments based on his use of personal pronouns. Indeed, considering Parfit's claim that "it might be possible to think of experiences in a wholly impersonal way" (Parfit [1], 211), he may have left his claim unspecified due to the lack of adequate linguistic tools. The point to remember is that Parfit is implicitly referring to what matters to us as human beings even though he may not for various other reasons want to state it that way. See end of this paper for more.
transplanted into two different bodies. Each of the resulting people, call them Jones and Smith, house personalities with all of Brown's psychological characteristics. The question in this case is, now that there are two individuals who each have all of Brown's psychological characteristics including apparent memories of his life with the right causal histories, what happens to Brown? It would appear as though Brown could either 1) cease to exist, 2) survive as either Jones or Smith, or 3) survive as both Jones and Smith.

It does not seem to make sense that if Brown survives when only one half of his brain is transplanted that he should be said to die if both halves of his brain are saved. In Parfit's words, a double success should not count as a failure.

Similarly, saying that Brown survives as only Jones or only Smith seems arbitrary, for if both Jones and Smith have Brown's brain and the corresponding psychological characteristics, on what basis could such a judgment of personal identity be made?

The third possibility appears at first to make no sense. Since identity relations are one-one, Brown cannot be said to be two people. If identity is implied by survival, this possibility is incoherent. Parfit discusses ways in which we could attempt to make sense of this third possibility by saying that Brown survives as one person with two bodies and a divided mind. After all, both Jones and Smith possess all of the criteria such as the holding of direct psychological connections with Brown that are usually used to verify the identity of persons. The end result is that such a view holds onto the

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6It is assumed that 1) half a brain is sufficient to carry the memories and psychological characteristics found in the whole brain, and 2) if only one half of Brown's brain is transplanted into another body while the rest of Brown (including the other half of his brain) dies, Brown survives as himself. For those who doubt that Brown would survive as himself even in this instance, see Parfit [1], 221 n5.
language of personal identity at the expense of a coherent concept of a person.\textsuperscript{7}

Parfit's answer is that in fission cases the original person does in fact survive as two people without his being either of those people in the sense that he is not personally identical to either of them. Everything that is important to our conceptions of survival is included in the psychological connections between both Smith and Brown and Jones and Brown. The lack of personal identity between Brown and the Smith-and-Jones survivors does not seem to matter.

Before discussing Parfit's analysis, it is important to lay out the example which shows that what matters in survival can have degrees. The argument here makes use of another science fiction example in which two people are fused into one.\textsuperscript{8} If X and Y fuse to make Z, person Z will not be exactly similar to either person X or person Y. In this way, Z cannot be said to be identical to either X or Y or both. In the same sense, Z is very similar to X and Y in that Z shares deep psychological connections with both, so in some sense X and Y survive in Z. We'd like to be able to say that X and Y survive to some degree less than total survival. Thus, it seems as though survival can be a matter of degree (Parfit [1], 213).

Parfit's assertion that survival is a matter of degree seems intuitively plausible. It is a fact of life that people's characters and personalities develop and change over time. The advantage of adopting Parfit's framework is that the degree to which a person is psychologically connected or continuous with another can be stated explicitly. Because judgments of personal identity are

\textsuperscript{7}If Jones and Smith fight each other to the death, is it suicide, homicide, both? If personal identity is what really matters, questions like this are not empty, so arbitrary answers would have to be avoided. These objections to this way of talking seem insurmountable. See Parfit [1], 221 n8.

\textsuperscript{8}Suppose half a brain from two different people are combined into a third body.
all-or-none, some information about the relatedness of different selves is lost if survival is judged to be just personal identity. Arbitrary distinctions should be given up by abandoning the language of personal identity in favor of a more accurate description of reality.

In some sense, however, the degree to which I am related to a future self is important for reasons that look suspiciously like those that argue for the importance of personal identity. Is what is missing when I survive as both Jones and Smith (i.e. personal identity is missing) really much less important to me than the fact that "I" have continued to exist as two new people who are no longer me but are instead merely related to me? The sense in which one person survives as two is oddly inconceivable. Survival through time is so tied to personal identity that survival without identity seems paradoxical.

Suppose that I am Jones and that I am about to die of heart failure, while Smith will live on for decades more. If personal identity is what matters (and we know that I am not numerically identical to Smith because the identity would not be one-one), Smith's living on would be only marginally better than if both of us died. On the other hand, if what matters is psychological connectedness, my dying and Smith's surviving would be almost as good as my ordinary survival with personal identity (Parfit [2], 215). When approached in these simplistic terms, it is not so clear that Parfit's relation captures what is most important to us. If I am about to die, do I suddenly feel better about things if I find out that the "routine" surgery I underwent last year was actually a successful transplanting of half my brain into Smith's body? I do not see how this news would make me feel much better; I would feel a lot better only if the doctor came in and told me that my heart troubles had miraculously left me.
It seems as though something about the first-person way of describing the situation changes our opinion about what happens. Parfit insists that how we choose to describe any particular case should have no moral or rational significance (Parfit [2], 265). This assertion dovetails neatly with the claim that we can know everything about what happens to a person without having an answer to the question of personal identity. The stumbling block arises in the attempt to devise a way in which we can think about what it would be like for one person to survive as two (that is, to survive without being the same person). When Parfit's fission and fusion cases are considered objectively, it seems as though I cannot simultaneously hold onto both beliefs that 1) any future person will either be me or not, and that 2) whether or not a future person is me is deeply significant (Parfit [2], 277). Yet when a first-person point of view is taken, these beliefs seem fundamental.

Parfit is correct in his assessment that personal identity consists in psychological continuity that is one-one. When one examines the make-up of the personal identity relation, one sees that it is psychological connectedness that does most of the work. However, despite the cogency of Parfit's arguments, there seems to be something deeply significant about personal identity. Whether irrationality or illusion, it matters a great deal to me whether the person I survive as tomorrow will be me or a mere byproduct of brain surgery. Parfit admits: "I can believe [my] view at the intellectual or reflective level. I am convinced by the arguments in favor of this view. But I think it likely that, at some other level, I shall always have doubts" (Parfit [2], 279).

In the end, Parfit's doubts may stem from a confusion between two meanings of the phrase "what matters." On an objective rendering of personal identity and survival over time, psychological connectedness seems
to be what matters. However, as soon as the circumstances are personalized (as when I find out that the person who will die tomorrow will be *me*), I find it hard to believe that personal identity is not what really matters. Parfit may have equated the objective sense of what matters with the subjective sense of the term. His failure to reconcile the differences between subjective and objective meanings of what matters in survival may lie at the root of our first-person worries.⁹

⁹I wish to thank Jean Kim and Rebecca Walker for their valuable comments and suggestions.
Works Cited

