A Modified Parfitian Survival Relation

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I: BACKGROUND

Parfit argues that the most fundamental question often asked by agents in the context of personal identity, “Will I survive?” actually does not require a strict notion of one-to-one, all-or-nothing identity at all. Parfit defines a “survival relation,” $S$, as the degree of psychological connectedness between $A$ and $B$. Psychological connectedness is the degree to which agents share mentalistic $q$-properties, most notably $q$-memories, $q$-intentions, and $q$-characteristics.¹ $S$ is neither one-to-one nor all-or-nothing. Thus, $S$ appears to solve the superficial problems for survival that are unsolved by identity relations.

$S$ is non-transitive in order to solve cases of consciousness, fission and fusion. Say an agent $A$’s consciousness is split into agents $B$ and $C$, each of whom has an identical consciousness to agent $A$. Agents $B$ and $C$ then continue

¹ A further discussion of $q$-properties and how they differ from normal properties can be found in Parfit, Personal Identity. The distinction is not terribly important for this discussion; the reader can think of connectedness as the extent to which two agents share mental characteristics like memory.
to live different lives. In order to say that agent A is S-related to agent B and agent C, but agent B is not S-related to agent C, the S relation must be non-transitive (unlike identity relations).

Parfit describes an alternate relation to S, which he calls *psychological continuity*, which is defined as a transitive relation in which different person-stages have overlapping memories. Notwithstanding, he ultimately rejects it because of its transitivity. However, I argue that it is possible to define a non-transitive survival relation based on a similar continuity argument.

II: THESIS

Parfit is correct that S need not be one-to-one, and so *any notion* of identity fails to answer the survival question. In cases of fission and fusion, the S-property of non-transitivity is essential. Otherwise, B and C in the scenario described in the introduction would be S-related. This is clearly unacceptable, as Parfit would agree. However, Parfit’s S-relation wrongly characterizes special cases, extreme change and cloning. S is based on long-term memory, which suffers from Locke’s and Hume’s problems: S does not allow an agent perdurance. I propose a new relation, S*(A,B) that resolves these cases, allowing for perdurance, unlike the Locke-Hume-Parfit endurance-only arguments, and provides definite answers to the survival question based on a modified unity relation of consciousness based on local memory, instead of q-property similarity.

III: DEFINITION OF S*

S*(A,B) is true if and only if B is the “end-point of a series of person-stages starting at person A each member of which has an experience of which the next could have a memory.” In short, A and B are the front and back ends of a locally continuous consciousness. I define “local” to mean that every two person-stages, each infinitesimal in time, are connected by the above experience-memory relation. Note that unlike the unity relation presented in Perry’s paper, S*(A,B) is *forward-looking-only*. A and B can only be S*-related if B comes after A. So, because S* is *forward-looking-only*, S* is non-transitive. This property of non-transitivity is required for S* to be compatible with fission and fusion. If A is split into B and C, A survives as B and C, while B and C have no relation to each other, which agrees with Parfit’s analysis of fission and fusion cases. It is the *forward-looking-only* part of the definition of S* which differentiates it from Parfit’s psychological continuity relation, and allows for S* to be non-transitive, and thus compatible with such cases.

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IV: S* IN CASES OF EXTREME, GRADUAL CHANGE

It is easy to intuit the fact that some persons undergo extreme change over their lifetimes while remaining the same person. For example, a 70-year-old could easily look back on their life and remember their younger 18-year-old self and how different they were back then. However, according to Parfit, since S is dependent upon q-properties, any mentalistic change would mean that S (between future and past selves) must decrease with time if an agent undergoes any change at all. However, this seems to be a disguised Humean notion that any mentalistic change to an agent at all makes an agent essentially different, based upon the fact that humans are a bundle of constantly changing impressions, which cannot endure over time. But I argue, if an agent forgets a memory or gains a new one, that does not “kill off” a small portion of the original person; this is the basic idea of the perdurance counter to Hume’s argument.

Say agent A undergoes such extreme change they lose all their q-properties. However, at every moment, the change is so gradual that the agent undeniably believes that they are the same person. This is not merely an illusion: A survives. This is naturally intuitive-- if agent A is told, “every day from now on, you will undergo slight mental change, you may forget something, you may change your mind about your intentions or desires. However, you will live an infinite number of days,” A will naturally probably be very pleased. A has no worries about their own survival, despite the fact that A will no longer retain any of their original q-properties. A is not worried because A\textsubscript{future} is psychologically forward-continuous with A. All states of A are so similar to the state of A immediately preceding it, linked by a local experience-memory relation, that even though A\textsubscript{future} is extremely different from A, A’s continuous consciousness from the present to the future is enough to guarantee A’s survival.

V: S* IN CASES OF CLONING

Say an experimenter tells agent A they will undergo a cloning procedure: agent A is cloned and all of their q-properties are transferred over to agent B, but agent A is told that they will be killed immediately after the procedure.

Of course, A will be terrified, thinking that they will not survive. It surely seems that A has reason to be terrified. However, according to the S survival relation, A has no reason to worry. A will survive as B, since B has all of A’s q-properties. But this seems strange. It will not be A having conscious experiences, it will be B, a distinctly separate person. The reason why A worries is because their forward-continuous-consciousness is at risk.
of being interrupted, not because they worry about the persistence of their memories.

S*, based on continuous local memory chains, i.e., forward-continuous consciousness, solves the problem. A does not S*-survive as B, since A’s consciousness is not locally linked with B’s. A is terrified because their continuous consciousness will disappear and not continue as B’s-- B’s consciousness is completely separate from A’s, even though they have all the same q-properties.

VI: CONCLUSION

The main problem with any definition of survival being based on q-properties instead of on local, continuous change is the same problem that Locke had in establishing a mental-only criterion of identity. Locke’s problem with defining identity in terms of memory had to do with the fact that his theory did not allow for agents to change at all without being logically incoherent; as Ken Taylor pointed out in lecture, “Locke is Hume without courage.” Parfit’s S relation shares Locke’s problems. It does not allow individuals to change drastically over time while maintaining their essential qualities in full, since it is based on psychological connectedness. What Parfit is really after is a relation based on psychological continuity, which he avoids due to his perception that continuity must be transitive. However, S* is a non-transitive psychological continuity. S* is the only coherent way to allow individuals to endure rather than endure, while upholding the non-transitivity property required by fission and fusion cases.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

