

Derek Parfit on Personal Identity: Relation-R and Moral Commitments

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Abstract: When we are going to describe personal identity, many questions will be arising, like am I the same person as when I was born and now I am writing this paper? How do we persist overtime? But these questions were the beginning of the modern discussion since John Locke's famous work "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (Locke, 1975), wrote about the importance of psychological continuity in determining personal identity. In contemporary metaphysics, there has been interesting debate around psychological continuity that stems largely from another great English philosopher at late 20th and early 21st centuries, Derek Parfit. Parfit was concerned with the perplexing question of self and personal identity. Do we have self? If so, what is it? Does self-possess any value? And so on. His philosophical examination of these issues was presented in seminal works such as is 1971 work "Personal Identity" (Parfit, 1971) and his classic book "Reasons and Persons" (Parfit, 1984). Parfit holds a reductionist view, and he concludes that personal identity must be a Psychological Criterion (which is called Relation-R) which approaches our persistence with three versions. These three versions of Psychological Criterion are Narrow, Wide and Widest with the right kind of cause. But the Wide and Widest version do not deal with personal identity as longer, only the Narrow version holds our personal identity in terms of normal cause. It is true that all types of versions are the mental states of psychological continuity of the strongest connections between two or more branches, which states, we persist as a chain of overlapping mental states to the connections from present I to the future I. But Parfit argues that the Narrow version is not totally applied for the persistence of personal identity because this version is necessary but not sufficient for all moral commitments. In that case, he claims that personal identity is often framed in the language of survival, and that the implicit assumption that survival implies identity is false. I will argue in this paper, Parfit's theory of "Relation-R" e.g., psychological connectedness and/or continuity is absurd to elaborate the person's moral commitments on his/her survival.

Keywords: Derek Parfit; Personal Identity; Reductionism; Non-Reductionism, Relation-R; Narrow Version; Commitments; Morality.

I Introduction

Parfit argued in favour of reductionists in his analysis of personal identity in his famous book "Reasons and Persons" (Parfit, 1984). Parfit believed that to exist the individual must be related by "what matter" which he termed "Relation-R". But he clarifies, personal identity is never holding "Relation-R" because it is *psychological continuity* and/or *connection*. Therefore, according to him, personal identity is a reduction in relation to *psychological continuity* and/or *connection*. According to the reductionists, individuals are nothing more than physical and mental states to which they are related by various relationships. On the

other hand, non-reductionist beliefs that “[A] person is a separately existing entity, distinct from his brain and body, and his experiences” (Parfit, 1984) but it is purely mental states. However, Parfit mentions the “Psychological Criterion” and the “Physical Criterion” in his book to explain that the way in which a person normally views his personal identity is the exact opposite of what would destroy the illusion of a person’s personal identity. So, in this case, he refers to the “Narrow Psychological Criterion” in terms of personal identity. For it maintains, the continued existence of the individual just like the “Physical Criterion” where no *branch* takes form. Because it “is required as part of the normal cause of psychological continuity.” (Parfit, 1984). But also makes it clear that “Narrow Psychological Criteria” are *necessary* but not *sufficient* for personal identity. Thus, Narrow version does not ultimately provide personal identity. However, since the Narrow version specifies *natural cause*, it does not support any irrational argument such as sudden changes in an object. So that which is constantly changing is acceptable in this version. In that case, Parfit thinks that personal identity is dependent on the nature of the individual and it is on this basis that we traditionally believe moral judgment analysis. Again, since everything is changeable, our thoughts change over time, and by following this, we represent the changing thoughts in a way that we improve so that our moral judgments take account of the changes.

But to make the personal identity of Parfit existential, he imagines an imaginary relationship which I mentioned earlier is the “Relation-R”. Based on this, we can affirm the existence of all the experiences of the individual because it can take multiple *branches* just like the original individual. For example, Parfit’s case of teletransportation is particularly relevant where he relates by “Relation-R” that I would simultaneously exist mentally with multiple individuals similar to myself and accumulate all sorts of experiences. There will be no disturbance of personal identity. But such a theory of Parfit is inconsistent with moral commitment because in this case, we cannot consider that a person is committed to me or to my counterpart, and if to both, this process will continue throughout life. Moreover, Parfit mentions the Narrow version where a person may not be naturally bound to fulfil his commitment because he thinks that if one commits in childhood, the race of commitment may not exist in his youth due to his/her natural causes. Although Parfit’s argument in this case is tenable, we hold that by promise we mean now and then. But the promises must be considered morally. Now I will point out in my paper why Parfit’s continued *survival* of the individual is not important i.e., why he did not value personal identity and why he considered “R-relation” is important and how he considered the criterion of commitment. Below I have analysed and argued the matter.

II “R-relation” and Moral Commitments: The argument

I have discussed here how plausible the theory of personal identity that Parfit discussed in his famous book “Reasons and Persons” (Parfit, 1984) in Part Three. It should be noted that

“The book, soon after its release, created sensation among philosophers because it challenged some of the most deep-rooted beliefs and widely held theories about morality, rationality, and the identity of our existence. It almost redrew the map of modern moral philosophy by creating a common ground of

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interaction between issues that are as varied as that from the metaphysics of self, value theory, philosophy of rationality, and existential philosophy. Some of its thought-experiments and analogies are so profound that they have almost changed the way we tend to think about ourselves and our nature.” (Neog, 2017)

I will first outline how Parfit interprets the Psychological Criterion and the Physical Criterion in the analysis of this theory. In this case, it is important to note that “While Parfit lays out two identity criteria, the Physical Criterion and the Psychological Criterion, it is certainly the latter with which he is most associated today (even if Parfit denies that identity is actually important, in the end).” (Lay, 2019). However, when Parfit (Parfit, 1984) begins the criterion of personal identity, he explains the Physical Criterion with many questions, there are “(1) What is the nature of a person? (2) What makes a person at two different times one and the same person? What is necessarily involved in the continued existence of each person over time?” he answers to these questions, “‘X today is one and the same person as Y at some past time if and only if ...’ Such an answer states the necessary and sufficient conditions for personal identity over time.”

In this case, he clarified, personal identity and person’s existence/persistence depends on the nature of the individual. He therefore suggests that such a person’s existence must always be self-aware because “we have properties of continuous existence that are not necessary” (Parfit, 1984). Gives an example to illustrate such an argument, “having the same heart and the same character are not necessary to our continued existence, but they are usually part of what this existence involves.” (Parfit, 1984). He therefore rejects those scholars who say that personal identity is bounded by a boundary, thus he rejecting Locke’s theory of personal identity. For according to Locke (Locke, 1975), the individual’s personal identity is as far as he can think through his memory. Where Parfit (Parfit, 1984) thinks, personal identity necessarily involves different bodily perceptions. He calls the process of this state of identity the *spatiotemporal physical continuity* of the object or person in which the person or object has a dimension of time. Which he called the *standard view*. Because he interprets this *standard view* as one in which there is an explanation of identity that is acceptable to all, even if such an explanation fails to make sense to the individual. Parfit gives the example of a billiard ball to illustrate this view.

“Suppose that the billiard ball that I painted red is the same as the white ball with which last year I made a winning shot. On the standard view, this is true only if this ball traced such a continuous path. It must be true (1) that there is a line through space and time, starting where the white ball rested before I made my winning shot, and ending where the red ball now is, (2) that at every point on this line there was a billiard ball, and (3) that the existence of a ball at each point on this line was in part caused by the existence of a ball at the immediately preceding point.” (Parfit, 1984)

It should be said that *physical continuity* involves a continuous existence in terms of identity of the individual. But Parfit also clarifies that some cases involve major changes in physical continuity, such as “A Camberwell Beauty is first an egg, then a caterpillar, then a chrysalis, then a butterfly. These are four stages in the physically continuous existence of a single organism.” (Parfit, 1984). But Parfit never accepted the great change or irrational change of object or person in identity because in this case, the person can

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never retain his physical identity. But he also clarified another point that a ship has *survived* for fifty years, and it has been repaired repeatedly in the course of time but still we define it as numerically one and the same ship even though the ship may have had every machinery changed. Just as our cells have changed repeatedly over time, we are able to explain whether our identity has occurred through a continuum of time. Parfit does not include any *survival* of person for his/her or any objects identity, it is just a *nature of cause*. So, he states about Physical Criterion of identity is,

“The Physical Criterion: (1) What is necessary is not the continued existence of the whole body, but the continued existence of enough of the brain to be the brain of a living person. X today is one and the same person as Y at some past time if and only if (2) enough of Y’s brain continued to exist, and is now X’s brain, and (3) this physical continuity has not taken a ‘branching’ form. (4) Personal identity over time just consists in the holding of facts like (2) and (3).” (Parfit, 1984)

Now I illustrate the Psychological Criterion of Parfit’s term is-

“The Psychological Criterion: (1) There is psychological continuity if and only if there are overlapping chains of strong connectedness. X today is one and the same person as Y at some past time if and only if (2) X is psychologically continuous with Y, (3) this continuity has the right kind of cause, and (4) it has not taken a ‘branching’ form. (5) Personal identity over time just consists in the holding of facts like (2) to (4).” (Parfit, 1984)

Parfit developed two theories regarding Psychological Criteria where he states,

“Psychological connectedness is the holding of direct psychological connections. Psychological continuity is the holding of overlapping chains of strong connectedness.” (Parfit, 1984)

In explaining the Psychological Criterion, Parfit points out, we have the idea of an overlapping chain of experience-memory which can be extended in various ways. For example, *transitive relations* are supported in terms of *psychological connectedness* because they directly relate to a person’s memories, e.g. “[A] relation F is transitive if it is true that, if X is F-related to Y, and Y is F-related to Z, X and Z must be F-related. Personal identity is a transitive relation. If Bertie was one and the same person as the philosopher Russell, and Russell was one and the same person as the author of *Why I Am Not a Christian*, this author and Bertie must be one and the same person.” (Parfit, 1984). But Parfit claims that *psychological continuity* is not a *transitive relation* because it maintains *strong connections* between individual experiences. In this case, Parfit makes it clear that I can be strongly attached to myself with an experience a day or two ago, but I cannot be strongly attached to an experience twenty years ago because there are so many mental events that we cannot remember. But adults retain some of their experiences of memories from twenty years ago, so Parfit says, the criterion of personal identity over time is necessarily linked to the individual’s identity. Therefore, personal identity is a *transitive relation*, and its criterion is also a *transitive relation*. But *strong connections* can never be *transitive* because the me of twenty years ago is never *strongly connected* to the

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me of now, but I am still known as the same person. However, Parfit mentions three versions of the Psychological Criterion of personal identity which are:

“These differ over the question of what the right kind of cause is. On the Narrow version, this must be the normal cause. On the Wide version, this could be any reliable cause. On the Widest version, the cause could be any cause.” (Parfit, 1984)

Since only Narrow Psychological Criteria holds *normal causes*, the *nature* of the individual is necessarily linked to the identity of the individual. Even if there are successive radical changes in a person’s character and those changes are within *natural/normal causes*, there is no deficiency in the person’s identity. Parfit therefore claims that this Narrow version corresponds mostly to Physical Criteria. He states,

“The normal causes of memory involve the continued existence of the brain. And some or all of our psychological features depend upon states or events in our brains. The continued existence of a person’s brain is at least part of the normal cause of psychological continuity.” (Parfit, 1984)

In that case, Narrow Psychological Criterion is,

“On the Narrow Psychological Criterion, (a) is necessary, but not sufficient. A person continues to exist if and only if (c) there is psychological continuity, (d) this continuity has its normal cause, and (e) it has not taken a branching form. (a) is required as part of the normal cause of psychological continuity.” (Parfit, 1984)

But in that context, it should be stated that “[T]he Narrow View, like most psychological approaches to persistence, treats all mental states as equally constitutive of persistence. Indeed, this is at first blush one of its advantages. Because all mental states contribute in a kind of value-neutral way on the Narrow View, a subject can persist through tremendous changes to any given type of mental state as long as sufficient direct connections among her *overall* psychology are retained. So, the Narrow View accepts that a subject with a suitable number of other direct connections could persist through complete amnesia (in terms of episodic memories), full desire apathy, or sweeping personality shift.” (Lay, 2019)

However, Parfit explains the terms reductionism and non-reductionism in terms of such criterion of moral judgments where he advocates reductionism. According to the reductionist view, “On the Physical Criterion, personal identity over time just involves the physically continuous existence of enough of a brain so that it remains the brain of a living person. On the Psychological Criterion, personal identity over time just involves the various kinds of psychological continuity, with the right kind of cause.” (Parfit, 1984). On the other hand, non-reductionist view is “[M]any Non-Reductionists believe that we are separately existing entities. On this view, personal identity over time does not just consist in physical and/or psychological continuity. It involves a further fact. A person is a separately existing entity, distinct from his brain and body, and his experiences.” (Parfit, 1984). However, the non-reductionist holds that a person exists as a

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separate physical entity, but it is a purely mental entity, and the reductionist holds that a person's existence involves physical, mental, certain acts, certain thoughts, organization of experiences, etc.

Analysed from Parfit's reductionist perspective, can personal identity be "what matters" at all? He claimed that "What matters is Relation R: psychological connectedness and/or continuity, with the right kind of cause." (Parfit, 1984). Because "what matter" can be any kind of factor that will properly be considered. As a result, we can make the best decisions imaginable which will help to give importance to personal identity. Parfit exemplifies as the Branch line case,

"One example may be the Branch-Line Case, where my life briefly overlaps with that of my Replica. Suppose that we believe that I and my Replica are two different people. I am about to die, but my Replica will live for another forty years. If personal identity is what matters, I should regard my prospect here as being nearly as bad as ordinary death. But if what matters is Relation R, with any cause, I should regard this way of dying as being about as good as ordinary survival." (Parfit, 1984)

According to Parfit, in his reductionist view, I am not a separate entity apart from various physical and mental phenomena. He states that "[I]dentity is all-or-nothing. Most of the relations which matter in survival are, in fact, relations of degree. If we ignore this, we shall be led into quite ill-grounded attitudes and beliefs." (Parfit, 1971). It is true that we cannot always define our identity because we can never explain our identity with the help of "what matters". So the person's identity must be "what matter" to hold all of our experiences only "(a) Relation R—psychological connectedness and/or psychological continuity—with the right kind of cause, provided (b) that this relation does not take a 'branching' form, holding between one person and two different future people." (Parfit, 1984). Because we can imagine that a future person has all kinds of experiences that can be explained in terms of the person's brain. But it does not claim that all these experiences and their interpretations are by one person alone. So personal identity is not important, because in this case is the "what matter" is fundamentally important to the "Relation-R" in any cause. Because in this case, "where one person is R-related to two other people" (Parfit, 1984). But "Relation-R" never provides personal identity. He states in the context,

"My targets are two beliefs: one about the nature of personal identity, the other about its importance." (Parfit, 1971), However, so far we have discussed Parfit's "Relation-R" which are in no way related to personal identity. Now I will argue based on this theory how Parfit judged his criteria for commitment and how much support it deserves.

According to Parfit, personal identity is a continuous process in our mind that is connected by various relationships but when we analyse moral discourses it is logically judged that personal identity is not important. Because personal identity is a mental continuum and connected to varying degrees, we may not be as familiar or connected to the events of one month as we are to the ideas of twenty years ago. As Parfit makes clear, the judgments we make morally do not carry personal identity but are nothing more than a mental continuum. But if we understand Parfit's interpretation, we will never mistake moral judgment and rationality for personal identity. Since, in Parfit's view, a person's *psychological continuity* changes to a

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degree such that the person can no longer be held responsible for a commitment he or she has previously made. Because the person's psychological continuity will depend on the degree of commitment to the relationship based on which the person should be held responsible. It can be stated that "[C]onsidering 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." (Schmid, 2005)

Parfit, following his reductionist view, argues that personal identity is not important in considering moral commitments. But according to non-reductionists, personal identity is an important part of moral consideration. Parfit contradicts the view of non-reductionists, arguing that if personal identity underlies morality, then all our commitments will equally persist in every part of life, even in old age, because it is necessary for morality. In this response, it can be stated about Parfit's identity thinking,

"An example of a non-reductionist view of persons is that we are immaterial souls of the kind envisaged by the dualist. Parfit thinks that this kind of view is wrong, and that we should be reductionists about persons: the existence of persons is not a further fact, beyond the psychological and physical facts." (Jeff Speaks, 2006)

However, Parfit argues that we are only responsible for our own commitment when it is in proportion to our degree of psychological continuity and connectedness. In that case, because the way we were previously committed is now weakly "R-related" to the people to whom we originally made our commitments. So, if I make a promise twenty years ago, I may not be bound to keep it, "it is plausible to claim that the weakening of connections would reduce the strength of a commitment" (Parfit, 1984). However, we are changing mentally and physically every moment in the continuum of our lives, our lives never flow evenly, so our commitments do not flow evenly with life. So, as we consistently change, we progress morally.

In this context, Parfit argues that the *normal causes* of why this happens to us are what he cites in the Narrow version. Because promises never carry the same promise over time, they are very weakly related to time, so the person cannot be held responsible for his earlier promises.

On the face of it Parfit's reductionist argument may seem positive. But if we judge its consequences, it will be seen that the meaning of the promise changes, and we cannot blame the person making the promise or commitments, which is in no way worthy of support. I think the outcome of this argument will have a negative impact on our society. Because the promise is in harmony with morality, it is deeply connected to the individual's existence. Parfit based his Narrow version on the individual's dispositional factors, which weakly involve "R-relationships" between various perceptions throughout the individual's life. In this case, the person's commitment is also weakened. But if Parfit indulges in such a reductionist doctrine, we cannot represent morality in society. As I am committed as a soldier of the country, I will serve the country. In such cases I will remain committed till death to defend the country. Here any change will not be given importance

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because I will be mentally prepared when I see that war has started in the country. Because I am committed as a soldier of the country. But in such a case Parfit's argument is not significant because from the time I made my commitment as a soldier to my country until today, Parfit's Narrow version becomes absurd in this case. Because the word promise/commitment means to sustain or protect it. So today if I don't pay tribute to the country as a soldier for the rest of my life then I will be committing an immoral act towards the country which will send a wrong message to society.

He clarified that "Relation-R" is the opposite of personal identity because it is not limited to one person and can take many *branches*. But Parfit's "Relation-R" process becomes absurd in terms of moral commitments. As Parfit's example of teletransportation is quite relevant here where he explains, teletransportation is a vehicle that can create an exact replica of me that is mentally continuous with me. But if I make a commitment to someone in this case, will my counterpart be similarly committed? To whom shall the one with whom I am committed be particularly liable, to me or to my counterpart? I think Parfit's "Relation-R" will struggle to answer many such questions.

Another consideration is that since Parfit's "Relation-R" can equally extend over multiple souls, they are successively connected to each series of individuals, so "Relation-R" are logically always degenerate. So the promises will continue, even though countless generations. Because the "Relation-R" will continue to replicate the individual's experiences to make them equally specific. I would like to say here, however, that Parfit's theories to explain the existence of individuals are patently absurd. Because admitting this would violate normal personal identity and would be deprived of a moral standard of social commitment. Moreover, Parfit's Narrow version could never judge the exact degree of commitment meaning. In this respect, we can propose that he wants to create an "error-theory" about personal identity,

"The most famous non-reductionist view is that of Descartes which declares us to be separately existing mental – or "thinking" – substances which can go on existing after the decomposition of our bodies. Non-reductionism, Parfit thinks, is enshrined in common-sensical thinking, but this doctrine is nevertheless false: "most of us have a false view about ourselves" (1987, p. 217). Thus, we might say that he espouses an error-theory about our identity." (Persson, 2016), However we proceed to the conclusion which I describe below.

III Conclusion

However, Parfit's Narrow version of his theory of personal identity always highlights *natural causes*. It is in this context that he considers commitments to the extent to which we compulsively engage in our lifestyles. But such a description creates a moral obstacle for the individual which leads the individual to break the promise. A promise in general is the duty of every person to protect something so as not to harm another person. Always employing oneself in the cause of welfare. But there may be many commitments that may not be morally supportable to separate yourself from those commitments. But it should be stated in favor of Parfit's account that "Parfit's explanations of the nature of persons and PI o. t. ought to be highly

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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.” (Schmid, 2005)

So, Parfit’s arguments are metaphysically true because his analysis of an imaginary “Relation-R” is a unique strategy for the individual to maintain his identity in which the individual can store all his experiences equally without any obstacles. But “Relation-R” poses obstacles to moral commitment even in its Narrow version of the *natural cause*. I think that while his theories may be considered supportable in metaphysical theory discussions, they are quite questionable in practical theory discussions.

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