



Parfit and the Russians

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which cannot but remain the most successful overall, whatever the outcome of this race, if there is no (non-inductive) reason to believe that that strategy will succeed on this occasion rather than counter-corroboration.

The pragmatic problem of induction is not what is there more reason to believe is the best strategy over the whole history of mankind, for we are not required to act in the past. The pragmatic problem is what is there more reason to believe is the best strategy in the future. Even if a corroborationist strategy is the best strategy over the whole history of mankind, it does not follow that it is the best strategy for the future. With one foot in the grave the Humean sceptic can still ask whether or not his daily bread *will* nourish, though he can scarcely doubt, for the reason Watkins evinces, that it *will have done* so more successfully than not over his lifetime.

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PARFIT AND THE RUSSIANS

By SIMON BECK

DEREK PARFIT points out in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984) that the adoption of his account of persons and their identity has a number of important consequences for some of our moral concepts. One concept affected is that of promising (section 110). He exemplifies some of the interesting issues involved with the case of 'The Nineteenth Century Russian':

In several years, a young Russian will inherit vast estates. Because he has socialist ideals, he intends, now, to give the land to the peasants. But he knows that in time his ideals may fade. To guard against this possibility, he does two things. He first signs a legal document which will automatically give away the land, and which can be revoked only with his wife's consent. He then says to his wife, 'Promise me that, if I ever change my mind, and ask you to revoke this document, you will not consent'. He adds, 'I regard my ideals as essential to me. If I lose these ideals, I want you to think that I cease to exist. I want you to regard your husband then, not as me, the man who asks you for this promise, but only as his corrupted later self. Promise me that you would not do what he asks.' (p. 327)

In time the Russian inherits, and, his ideals having faded, asks his wife to revoke the document. But she sees herself as committed to his earlier self, whom the request shows to exist no longer. Since her commitment is not to his present self, the husband cannot

release her from her obligation, and so she refuses to revoke the document.

Parfit commends the wife's action; by it she shows that she understands the true nature of persons and their identity. For personal identity, Parfit tells us, can be reduced to psychological continuity, which is just the holding of overlapping chains of psychological connectedness (p. 206). Since such connectedness is a matter of degree — one can be more or less strongly connected to one's earlier self — it makes sense that the degree to which one is committed by the actions of that earlier self can vary accordingly. As a result, a promise made long ago may not bind one to the same degree now as it did at the time at which it was made; in cases where connectedness is sufficiently weak, such a promise may no longer bind one at all. It would be like a promise made by someone else, and according to Parfit it is part of the concept of promising that you can't bind someone else by *your* promise. Because of the true nature of persons it makes sense to talk of earlier and later selves of a person; and in Parfit's eyes, promises attach not to *persons*, but to *selves*.

The case of the Russian illustrates the point that the identity of the person to whom a promise is made is also important in this context: for the degree of commitment one has to a promisee can vary according to the degree of connectedness of his present self to the self who received the promise. In Parfit's example we are presented with a limiting case in which connectedness is affected in such a way that we can talk of a new self of the Russian once his early ideals have faded. What results is a situation similar to that involving a promise to a person now dead. In that case the person who could absolve you of your obligation no longer exists; in this case the self who could do so no longer exists. But it is the same principle at work in each case, and the effect is the same: you are bound by a promise from which you cannot be released. Thus it is that the Russian cannot release his wife from her obligation, and the document remains unrevoked.

Although Parfit's view of what promising involves is not unproblematic, for the sake of the present argument his view can be accepted. That is, I will take it that one can only bind oneself by a promise, and that only the person to whom one has made a promise can release one from the obligation thus acquired.

Let us now take a closer look at the situation of Parfit's Russian and his wife, with a view to seeing whether Parfit's description is at all adequate. As he describes things, the wife is committed to a self no longer in existence, and so is not in a position to revoke the document. The Russian is thus committed to giving away his inheritance. But how is this outcome possible? What does the work here for Parfit is the principle that one cannot, unless one is the self which received a promise, absolve the promisor from her obligation. This principle, however, goes hand-in-hand with the

principle that the promise of one self cannot commit other selves (even of the same person). Parfit's invocation of the first principle results in a violation of the second: for by his promise as a young man the Russian attempts to sign away the inheritance of his later self. This is to commit another self by one's own promise, and that we've just seen is not on. The young Russian is only entitled to sign away lands that his current self would inherit — but then the revocation question would never arise.

If Parfit wants to use the one principle without falling foul of the other, then he must establish some relevant difference between them explaining why only the one counts in the circumstances laid down. Both are, however, the direct consequences which Parfit outlines of his view of persons and their identity. Thus, if he wants to insist that the later self of the Russian is indeed committed by the promise of the earlier self, then we are dealing with a new concept of promising — one according to which you *can* bind others by your promise.

There is a further aspect of the effect on promising of adopting Parfit's view on persons and their selves which seems to get ignored in the case of the Russian and his wife. Parfit points out that, where promising is concerned, the identities of both parties involved are important. We are thus entitled to look closely at the position of the Russian's wife in the affair. Are not wives self-sensitive just as husbands are? And should this not affect her obligation to keep her promise to her husband?

There is a difference between the situation of the wife and that of her husband in that the wife does not undergo a change of ideals similar to that of the husband. But this difference may not be as relevant as it may at first seem. Parfit won't commit himself to the claim that adopting the reductionist view of persons entails that we can never be bound by past commitments. But, as mentioned, he does accept that the degree of commitment is affected by the degree of psychological connectedness which currently obtains. Now, we are told that the Russian as a young man extracts the promise not to revoke the document from his wife; and it is only in middle age that he tries to release her from the obligation. We can safely say that twenty years have passed between the two occasions. And it is Parfit's own claim that over twenty years psychological connectedness weakens considerably: for instance, he himself can remember very little of his experiences twenty years before writing his book (p. 206). It seems, then, that we would be pretty safe in assuming that the passing time which produced a new self in the Russian would produce a new self in his wife as well. But if this is the case, then the Russian's wife in middle age is no longer bound by her earlier promise.

Perhaps this is all too quick. As Parfit warns, we need to be careful of talking too glibly of changes between selves. But even if we take this point, there remains much which is bothering. For even if

the wife is not a new self at the crucial time, the degree of connectedness between herself now and herself then will be considerably weakened. There are still some connections, and so there is still some commitment — and from this bit of commitment she cannot be released. The point Parfit wishes to make remains. Or does it? For although we are assured that the Russian is himself a new self, some connections remain there too. In losing his socialist ideals he does not lose all of his memories, character traits, projects, and so on — and these do not become irrelevant simply because there has been a major change in his ideological outlook. The Russian's wife made a promise to her young husband, not only to the socialist aspect of him. In the light of this, just as she retains some degree of obligation, so he retains some degree of entitlement to absolve her from that obligation. Whether these cancel each other out is anybody's guess, but what is clear is that things are much more difficult in Parfit's world than he is letting on.

More can be said in support of this last claim. Assume that the years have changed the wife to a similar degree that they have changed the husband. Assume also, along with Parfit, that the husband cannot release his wife from her obligation. It follows that the wife is no longer obligated by her promise, anyway. But despite the fact that she is not the one who made the promise not to revoke the document, she can revoke the document, since she is still the Russian's wife — and thus according to the wording of the agreement entitled to revoke.

This point of detail is only the start of the complexities which arise here in Parfit's world. For it is only in virtue of a promise made years before, even before the document was drawn up, that this woman is the Russian's wife. Marriage is bound only by a promise, and promising has become more difficult than it was before reductionism. Following the Parfit principle, one cannot bind one's later selves by the promise of one's present self. By assumption, the Russian's 'wife' is now a different self, and so no longer bound by her marriage vows. In the absence of a renewed marriage vow, this woman is no longer the Russian's wife, and thus not entitled to revoke the document.

Indeed, even if she were not a new self at the time of inheritance, the Russian woman would not be entitled to revoke the document. For the standard marriage promise contains a clause clearly pointing out that the promise is nullified on the death of one's spouse. Parfit himself draws the analogy between the Russian's change of self and death (p. 328); the self to whom the woman made her marriage promise no longer exists, and that amounts to the same thing as death where promises are concerned. Thus it turns out that the Russian man's change of ideology makes the woman his widow rather than his wife, and excludes her from the conditions expressed in the document.

This complication need not be a general one in Parfit's world. He points out that one can promise to help someone 'and all their future selves', and such a clause could easily be included in the marriage promise. But he is equally clear in showing that there is no way of getting around a change of the *promisor's* self by changing the wording or conditions attaching to promises. Any promise is made by a particular self and as a matter of principle that self cannot bind others by its promise, no matter how the promise is worded.

This confirms the allegation that Parfit's world is a much more difficult one to live in than he acknowledges, and that the picture presented by his description of the Nineteenth Century Russian example is a misleading one. Any long-term promise is something one can no longer sincerely make once one is in Parfit's world, and commitments become extremely complex, as we have seen. Of course, one can avoid some of this (as Parfit does in the case of the Russians) by ignoring certain of the implications of the change to a reductionist view of persons and their identity. But then one ends up with a different concept of promising; one according to which, for instance, one can bind others by one's own promise.

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UNEVEN STARTS AND JUST DESERTS

By BRUCE N. WALLER

IN life's race, the different results people achieve are due to "uneven starts". Since people start unequally — at starting points not of their own choosing or making — they are not morally responsible (do not justly deserve blame or credit) for the finish. This uneven starts position is stated elegantly by John Rawls:

It seems to be one of the fixed points of our considered judgments that no one deserves his place in the distribution of native endowments, any more than one deserves one's initial starting place in society. The assertion that a man deserves the superior character that enables him to make the effort to cultivate his abilities is equally problematic; for his character depends in large part upon fortunate family and social circumstances for which he can claim no credit. ([2], p. 104)

Rawls's claim that uneven starts undermine just deserts has recently been attacked on two fronts. Daniel Dennett [1] and George Sher [3] offer distinct but similar defences of just deserts, and each develops a spirited challenge to the uneven starts claims.