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PERSONS IN TIME: METAPHYSICS AND ETHICS

Normative ethics is concerned with persons, and with what it is for a person to have a good life. An adequate account of persons must include an account of their persistence conditions through time; an adequate account of the good life must talk about its shape in time. So normative ethics cannot avoid issues about time.

One reason why Derek Parfit's classic *Reasons and Persons* [RP] is such a distinguished contribution to normative ethics is because it takes so seriously these, and other, issues about time and ethics. Even ethicists like me, who completely reject Parfit's views about these issues, can learn a lot from trying to replace them with alternatives. That is what I shall do here.[1]

1. PERSONS IN TIME: METAPHYSICS

> "On the Reductionist View that I defend, persons exist. And a person is distinct from his brain and his body, and his experiences. But persons are not separately existing entities. The existence of a person, during any period, just consists in the existence of his brain and his body, and the thinking of his thoughts, and the doing of his deeds, and the occurrence of many other mental and physical events... Personal identity... just involves physical and psychological continuity... both of [which] can be described without claiming that experiences are had by a person" (Parfit (1984) p. 275).

To begin with, compare Parfit's claim in the last sentence with the following claim:

Personal identity just involves physical and psychological continuity, both of which can be described without claiming that experiences are had by a *subject*.

This latter claim, reductionism about the subject, seems different from Parfit's view, reductionism about the person. It is one thing to claim that there is no separately existing person who 'has' experiences. It is another thing to claim that experiences are not essentially 'had' at all by anything, whether or not it exists separately. That claim seems both a further step, and a less plausible one.

On *RP* p. 225, Parfit seems to move from reductionism about the person to reductionism about the subject almost without noting the transition:

> "We cannot deduce, from the content of our experiences, that a thinker is a separately existing entity. And, as Lichtenberg[2] suggests, because we are not separately existing entities, we could fully describe our thoughts without claiming that they have thinkers. We could fully describe our experiences, and the connections between them, without claiming that they are had by a subject of experiences. We could give what I call an *impersonal* description" (Parfit (1984) p. 225).

H. Dyke (ed.), Time and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection, 189—207.

Lichtenberg argues that "because we are not separately existing entities," therefore "we could fully describe our thoughts without claiming that they have thinkers." This is a *non sequitur*. True, thinkers (more generally: experiencers) do not have to be "separately existing entities." For all that, the relation of any experience to some experiencing subject is an essential property of that experience.[3] We cannot conceive of experiences as only contingently yours, or mine, or whoever's. There is no possible world in which *this very experience* is some other subject's. (Still less could the same experience be *no* subject's experience, as in Mrs Gradgrind's famous absurdity: "I think there's a pain somewhere in the room, but I couldn't rightly say that it's mine."[4]) If an impersonal description of experience involves eliminating the experiencing subject, then an impersonal description is not a real possibility, and reductionism about the subject is false. So if reductionism about the person is worth further discussion—as I think it is—it had better not entail reductionism about the subject.

I shall come back to the relation between the subject or person and the experience. For now, I move on to comment on Parfit's weaker and more plausible claim, reductionism about the person. His argument for this, to judge by the first quotation I gave from him above (Parfit (1984) p. 275), runs as follows:

1. If all the data relevant to personal identity can be described without claiming that experiences are had by a person, then reductionism about persons is true.
2. Personal identity just involves physical and psychological continuity, both of which can be described without claiming that experiences are had by a person.
3. Therefore, reductionism about persons is true.

Consider premise 2's claim that physical and psychological continuity can be described without claiming that experiences are had by a person. "*Can* be described": but why would we want to? And what does this mere possibility show? Suppose we treat the *Mona Lisa* as a two-dimensional grid of very small squares, each of them numbered, and in each of which a single colour appears. Then the *Mona Lisa can* be described as a list of numbers correlated with names of colours, without claiming that these squares of colour "are had by the *Mona Lisa*." So what? Even if we can describe the *Mona Lisa* this way, we're not obliged to. Nor is it, for most of our purposes, a very helpful or revealing description. From most points of view, the exercise is simply perverse. ("Square 30771 ochre, Square 30772 peach, Square 30773 black: isn't that *marvellous*?")

To show that pictures—or persons—are not "separately existing entities," an argument is needed for the conclusion that the description which leaves out the person or the picture is the correct description. (The only correct description? The most correct description?) Arguments for this conclusion may be hard to come by. This is an area where we may feel the attraction of very different impulses in ontology: for instance, the *reductionist*, the *eirenic*, and the *inclusive*.

The *reductionist* impulse to which Parfit appeals—the urge to eliminate all ways of looking at what-there-is except for one—is certainly one possibility. But there is also the *eirenic* impulse to say that the answer to the question "Do persons or

pictures exist?" depends on who's asking ar don't exist: the discourse of physics does no for the art student or the man in the stre discourse of art quantifies over pictures, the over both pictures and persons. Does the e pictures mean that they don't "*really* exist' discourse of art of electrons and neutrinos exist" either. The physicist, the man in t contradicting each other about what exists. T merely talking, for different ends, in differe preferable to the others.

The eirenic response is also suggested by Star cases (Parfit (1984) pp. 211-212, 472). I person-components as talk about Venus relat won't follow (as Parfit wants it to) that pe aren't. Instead, it will follow that talk a components are two equally good ways o matter, and that there is no reason to elimi other sort.

In the same passage as the Venus/Evenin examples of items which (he thinks) are l separately." These examples are *nations* and

> "Most of us are reductionists about nations. Nations exist. Ruritania does not exist, but Fra is not an entity that exists separately, apart (1984) p. 211).

> "The existence of a club is not separate fro together in certain ways. The continued ex members having meetings that are conducted all the facts about how people held meeting everything there is to know. This is why we answer the question, 'Is this the very same cl even without answering this question, we can (Parfit (1984) p. 213).

Actually, these two examples do not seer own position. They might just provoke a t impulse. That is, they might prompt us to i club, *is* an entity that exists separately, institutional or social reality are irreduci constitute them.

To make out this claim, we could perhap Anscombe's "relative bruteness." In a famo discussion of the relation of facts to values realities such as contracts and debts are ty non-institutional circumstances, to which reducible:

pictures exist?" depends on who's asking and why. For the physicist, maybe, they don't exist: the discourse of physics does not quantify over persons or pictures. But for the art student or the man in the street, persons and pictures do exist: the discourse of art quantifies over pictures, the discourse of ordinary people quantifies over both pictures and persons. Does the exclusion from physics of persons and pictures mean that they don't "*really* exist"? No, because the exclusion from the discourse of art of electrons and neutrinos doesn't mean that they don't "*really* exist" either. The physicist, the man in the street, and the art student are not contradicting each other about what exists. They are (the eirenic response concludes) merely talking, for different ends, in different ways, none of which is intrinsically preferable to the others.

The eirenic response is also suggested by Parfit's own appeal to Venus/Evening Star cases (Parfit (1984) pp. 211-212, 472). If talk about persons relates to talk about person-components as talk about Venus relates to talk about the Evening Star, then it won't follow (as Parfit wants it to) that person-components are real and persons aren't. Instead, it will follow that talk about persons and talk about person-components are two equally good ways of talking about the very same subject matter, and that there is no reason to eliminate either sort of talk in favour of the other sort.

In the same passage as the Venus/Evening Star analogy, Parfit himself gives two examples of items which (he thinks) are like persons in that they do not "exist separately." These examples are *nations* and *clubs*:

> "Most of us are reductionists about nations. We would accept the following claims: Nations exist. Ruritania does not exist, but France does. Though nations exist, a nation is not an entity that exists separately, apart from its citizens and territory..." (Parfit (1984) p. 211).

> "The existence of a club is not separate from the existence of its members, acting together in certain ways. The continued existence of the club just consists in its members having meetings that are conducted according to the club's rules. If we know all the facts about how people held meetings, and about the club's rules, we know everything there is to know. This is why we would not be puzzled when we cannot answer the question, 'Is this the very same club?'. We would not be puzzled because, even without answering this question, we can know everything about what happened" (Parfit (1984) p. 213).

Actually, these two examples do not seem to give unequivocal support to Parfit's own position. They might just provoke a third ontological impulse—the *inclusive* impulse. That is, they might prompt us to insist that the nation of France, or some club, *is* an entity that exists separately, on the grounds that certain sorts of institutional or social reality are irreducible to the lower orders of facts that constitute them.

To make out this claim, we could perhaps deploy some such notion as Elizabeth Anscombe's "relative bruteness." In a famous but (I would say) still under-utilised discussion of the relation of facts to values, Anscombe points out that institutional realities such as contracts and debts are typically constituted by arrangements of non-institutional circumstances, to which arrangements they are nonetheless not reducible:

"Suppose that I say to my grocer 'Truth consists in *either* relations of ideas, as that 20 shillings = £1, *or* matters of fact, as that I ordered potatoes, you supplied them, and you sent me a bill. So it doesn't apply to such a proposition as that I *owe* you such and such a sum.'

Now if one makes this comparison, it comes to light that the relation of the facts to the description 'X owes Y so much money' is ... that of being 'brute relative to' that description. Further, the 'brute' facts mentioned here themselves have descriptions relative to which *other* facts are 'brute'—as, e.g., *he had potatoes carted to my house* and *they were left there* are brute facts relative to 'he supplied me with potatoes.' And the fact *X owes Y money* is in turn brute relative to other descriptions, e.g. "X is solvent"... if *xyz* is a set of facts brute relative to a description A, then *xyz* is a set out of a range some set among which holds if A holds; but the holding of some set among these does not necessarily entail A, because exceptional circumstances can always make a difference... Further, though in normal circumstances *xyz* would be a justification for A, that is not to say that A just comes to the same as *xyz*." (Anscombe (1958) p. 28).

If clubs, or nations, or pictures, or persons, are realities in anything like the way in which such social institutions as debts and contracts are realities, then it is not even that their existence is genuine enough *from a certain perspective* (as the eirenic view says). Rather, their existence is as the inclusive view describes it. It is genuine *and non-perspectival.*

These alternatives to reductionism suggest that the argument for reductionism (1-3) given above needs amendment. It should really read like this (stars indicate altered premises):

1*. If all the data relevant to personal identity can be described without claiming that experiences are had by a person, then either reductionism about persons is true, or the eirenic response is justified.
2. Personal identity just involves physical and psychological continuity, both of which can be described without claiming that experiences are had by a person.
3*. Therefore either reductionism about persons is true, or the eirenic response is justified.

Now obviously (1*-3*) isn't much of an argument for reductionism. If (1*-3*) is sound, that rules out the inclusive response, which denies (2). But no reason has been given for rejecting the inclusive response and accepting (2); and anyway, (1*-3*) doesn't exclude the eirenic alternative to reductionism. So Parfit needs to see off the inclusive response by arguing for (2). If his argument for (2) can also show that there is something metaphysically privileged about the descriptions that include physical and psychological continuity but exclude persons, that argument will also rule out the eirenic response.

Parfit's response[5] is to claim that all talk about persons as such involves no "further facts," no "deep facts;" all the deep or further facts are only about the continuities in their experience. ("Further facts" and "deep facts" are Parfit's own terms: see e.g., (Parfit (1984) pp. 262, 277, 279.) The idea is to argue for (2) like this:

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2.1 If all facts about sameness of person consist in other facts, then facts about sameness of person are not deep facts.
2.2 All facts about sameness of person consist in other facts, about physical and psychological continuity.
2.3 Therefore, facts about sameness of person are not deep facts, and the other facts that they consist in, about physical and psychological continuity, are deep facts.
2. Therefore, personal identity just involves physical and psychological continuity, both of which can be described without claiming that experiences are had by a person.

If this argument works, it excludes both the eirenic and the inclusive responses by showing that not all facts are equally "deep," and that the facts that are deepest are the ones that the reductionist appeals to.

However, the argument does not work. One obvious problem with it is the almost unanswerable question, "How should we individuate facts?": a question which seems tailor-made to induce the eirenic response. Again, the relation of "consisting" that the argument supposes to hold between facts is equally obscure. It is not obvious, for example, why that relation should not be symmetric, so that facts *p* and *q* can "consist in" each other. (Come to that, it isn't obvious why the relation should not be reflexive, so that fact *r* can "consist in" *itself*.)

Even setting these points aside, there is a third problem: the inference from (2.2) to (2.3) is a *non sequitur*. It is a *non sequitur* because there is nothing in (2.1-2.2) to show that facts about physical and psychological continuity are deep facts. Suppose (in line with the evidence of Parfit's text: see e.g., Note 5) that a fact is deep iff it does not consist in any other fact. Then what reason is there to think that facts about physical and psychological continuity do not "consist in other facts" just as much as facts about personal identity do?

So far as I can see facts about the identity and persistence of pretty well anything can, if you like, be seen as "consisting in other facts." Non-reductionists (some of them, anyway) want facts about the identity and persistence of persons not to consist in any other facts. Parfit wants facts about the identity and persistence of person-components (e.g. the relata of what he calls "R-relations") not to consist in any other facts; and (Parfit (1984) p. 228) he charges with unintelligible obscurantism those non-reductionists who take facts about persons to be *sui generis* and irreducible to other sorts of facts. But what's sauce for the non-reductionist is sauce for the reductionist. If non-reductionists face a dilemmatic choice between a retreat into mysteries about irreducible persons and the admission that persons' persistence consists in other facts, then reductionists face a dilemmatic choice between a retreat into mysteries about irreducible person-components and the admission that person-components' persistence consists in other facts.

On the face of it, there are no obviously legitimate restrictions on which facts are to be counted as *the* unique set of irreducible or basic facts—no more than there are obviously legitimate restrictions on which existents are to be counted as *the* unique set of irreducible or brute existents. Reductionism tells us that "though persons exist, we could give a *complete* description of reality *without* claiming that persons exist"

(Parfit (1984) p. 212): we need mention only person-components and their arrangements. Well, why stop at omitting persons? Aren't there plenty of other sorts of entity we might equally well omit from some inventory of reality that we chose to offer? Arguably the fact of the existence of a tree during any period "just consists in" facts about the suitably arranged existence of its trunk, roots and branches, the transpiration of water and other processes of growth... So why not argue that facts about arboreal identity "just involve" facts about the suitably-arranged continuity of such items; that all such items can be described without subordinating them to some further item *the tree*; and so that the sort *trees* (and facts about that sort[6]) can, if we like, be eliminated from our world-inventory?

Indeed, why not offer similar moves for any sort of composite spatiotemporal continuant (CSC) whatever? Since (apparently) everything we might want mentioned in any world-inventory is composite, we can, if we like, construct inventories which omit all sorts of sorts of things. Persons are one such omissible sort. But until we see arguments showing that any inventories are preferable to others, or that there's any sort of CSC which must appear in every inventory, we can't count the failure of the sort *persons* to appear in every correctly compiled world-inventory against that sort. Nor can we avoid the conclusion that just the same kind of omissibility applies to the sort *person-components*. If so, the fact that persons consist of components of other sorts can't be used to show that it's these other sorts of things and their relations which are irreducible, and so which "really matter." For *pari passu* it isn't these components but their components which are irreducible and really matter; and so on indefinitely. The reductionist suggestion seems to be that we should test whether sorts of items are irreducible and "really matter" by applying the test of whether they must occur in a complete description of reality. But this "Complete Description Test" leaves persons and their components on precisely the same footing.

There is an analogy here with the debate about universals. Many nominalists (e.g. Quine) have insisted that we don't have to posit universals e.g. of redness *because* we can paraphrase them away into ontologically uncommitting talk of different things being red. But as Mellor and Oliver point out in their introduction to (Mellor and Oliver (1997)), this popular paraphrasing move is pretty inconclusive even if it works (which has been much questioned[7]). If a paraphrase from universal-invoking discourse into particulars-only discourse is possible, then a paraphrase from particular-invoking discourse into universals-only discourse seems equally possible.[8] Similarly with persons and person-components. We may be able to parse away talk about persons by way of talk about person-components. But this fact is only likely to have interesting consequences if the converse translation is not equally readily available.

The upshot is that persons and person-components are on the same footing relative to the Complete Description Test. The considerations that might persuade us that persons fail that test can equally well be applied to persuade us that all CSCs, and in particular person-components, will fail it if persons do. Since we can say that any CSC consists in nothing over and above its components, persons aren't specially vulnerable to this point, nor are person-components specially immune to it. The Complete Description Test does not help us to complete the case for reductionism;

for it does not support any plausible argument for (2.3). But remember that we need (2.3) to establish (2) and we need (2) in the main argument for reductionism.

To help the reader a little, the shape of the argument so far is this:

1**. If all the data relevant to personal identity can be described (and are best described)[9] without claiming that experiences are had by a person, then reductionism about persons is true.

2**. Personal identity just involves physical and psychological continuity, both of which can be described (and are best described)[10] without claiming that experiences are had by a person.

Sub-argument for 2:

2.1 If all facts about sameness of person consist in other facts, then facts about sameness of person are not deep facts.

2.2 All facts about sameness of person consist in other facts, about physical and psychological continuity.

2.3 Therefore, facts about sameness of person are not deep facts, and the other facts that they consist in, about physical and psychological continuity, are deep facts.

3. Therefore reductionism about persons is true.

What Parfit now needs, I am urging, is a sub-sub-argument for (2.3). This will have to be an argument for giving facts of his preferred sort, about person-components and their continuities over time, an ontological privilege over facts about persons and their identities over time. And indeed Parfit offers such an argument. This is his Empty Question Argument.

An Empty Question Argument is one that shows that some question is an empty one. "How long is a piece of string?" is an example of an empty question;[11] "When is a hill a mountain?" is another. An empty question is one any answer to which is a mere stipulation. It is a question such that, even without answering it, "we can know everything about" the case of which it is asked (Parfit (1984) p. 213). So for instance we could know that a certain physical portion of the stuff hemp is 5mm x 5mm x 10mm, or that a certain protrusion on the earth's surface is 2999 feet above sea level at its highest point. We might also know that two different speakers, or groups of speakers, differ over whether this hill is a mountain, or whether this portion of hemp is long enough relative to its other two dimensions to count as what they conventionally describe as "a piece of string" rather than a scrap of hemp. We don't need to adjudicate between these different conventions to know everything real, non-conventional, about that hill or piece of hemp. That the piece of hemp is 5mm x 5mm x 10mm, and that the hill is 2999 feet high, are real facts about them. That they are or aren't respectively a piece of string and a mountain: these are not real facts about anything. These are merely conventional facts.

Here then is Parfit's Empty Question Argument (EQA):[12]

Empty Question Argument (EQA)

2.3.1 If facts about persons and their identities over time are 'deep facts,' there will be no cases where questions about whether or not we have the same person at two times are empty questions.

2.3.2 There are cases where questions about whether or not we have the same person at two times are empty questions.

2.3.3 Therefore, facts about sameness of person are not deep facts.

It is in his argument for 2.3.2 that Parfit appeals to his famous thought experiments about split-brains, teletransportation, Greta Garbo and the rest (*RP* sections 75, 84-86). The point of these cases is to make it look like an empty question whether or not we have the same person at the end of some such bizarre process of transformation.

Most of Parfit's thought experiments are about *sorites* cases; all of them are about problems to do with vagueness. So presumably the standard ways of dealing with *sorites* problems and with vagueness all apply to Parfit's thought experiments. One quick and simple way to reject EQA would be to become an epistemicist about vagueness.[13] The relevant epistemicist claim is this: It may be impossible for me to discover fully the exact extension in all conceivable cases of the predicate "____ is diachronically identical with Timothy Chappell." It doesn't follow that there is no non-stipulative way of assigning either the truth-value True or the truth-value False to every proposition which presents some object as argument to that predicate. All that follows is that there are possible cases where we don't know how to assign these truth-values. So it doesn't follow that there are any possible cases where it is an empty question whether someone is or is not identical with me. (Parallel remarks will of course apply to the predicates "_____ is a piece of string," "____ is a mountain," and indeed "___ is the same club as ____" or "___ is the same nation as ___." For the resolute epistemicist there won't be any empty questions: there will only be unanswerable ones.)

Now I find the epistemic view of vagueness attractive on independent grounds. So as far as I am concerned, its neat way of dealing with Parfit's thought experiments just adds to its already considerable attractions.

However, most philosophers find epistemicism completely incredible. So instead of pursuing that line against Parfit, I will point out that the conclusion of EQA as stated above is not (2.3), the claim that "Facts about sameness of person are not deep facts, and the other facts that they consist in, about physical and psychological continuity, are deep facts." It is (2.3.3), which is only the claim that "Facts about sameness of person are not deep facts." (2.3.3) is, as it were, only one half of (2.3). But it is unclear how we are to get hold of the other half. Parfit evidently needs a further argument (EQA2):

Empty Question Argument 2 (EQA2)

2.3.4. If facts about person-components and their continuities over time are 'deep facts,' there will be no cases where questions about whether or not we have a continuity between person-components at two times are empty questions.

2.3.5. There are no cases where questions about whether or not we have a continuity between person-components at two times are empty questions.

2.3.6. So facts about person-components and their continuities over time are 'deep facts.'

So far as I recall, Parfit never states EQA2; but without it, the most he shows is that neither facts about persons nor facts about their components are 'deep facts.' Is Parfit entitled to assert EQA2?

The answer to that depends on what person-components are, and on what continuity is. The person-components that Parfit has in mind are psychological entities of types which "pair up" with each other, such as experiences and memories of them, intentions and actions on them, wishes and their fulfilments. (For myself, I do not accept that such things are in any sense whatever *components* or *parts* of a person—no more than the colour of a cube is a component or part of that cube; but let that pass for the moment.) The continuity that Parfit has in mind is what he calls R-relatedness, which turns out to be "psychological connectedness and/ or continuity, with the right kind of cause" (where "the right kind of cause" can be any kind of cause) (Parfit (1984) p.262).

So can it ever be an empty question whether person-components at two times are psychologically connected and/or continuous? Can it, for instance, be an empty question whether this memory of the Dunedin Sound that I have now is psychologically connected with an actual experience of the Dunedin Sound that I had three months ago?

To answer this we need to ask a further question. How do we generally determine whether e.g. experiences and memories of them are psychologically connected? The answer, of course, is *via* the notion of a person. We don't doubt that my apparent memories of the Dunedin Sound in February are genuine, because we know that I (the person) was in Dunedin in February. Likewise, we don't doubt that my apparent memories of experiencing the Battle of Waterloo, however vivid they may be, are some sort of delusion, because we know that Waterloo happened 149 years before I was born.[14] Whether or not these and other (alleged) person-components count as connected or continuous depends on whether or not we have a way of assigning them to the same person. And crucially, there is no other way of making such judgements: it is not as if we can get hold of the person-components aside from the person.

Probably, in fact, the best way to understand the relation of an experience to the person who has it is adjectival: that I am remembering Dunedin now is a property of mine now. (Cp. my criticisms on p. 190 above of the no-ownership view of experience.) If so, that shows how close is the relationship between a person and their components. It also shows why experiences and memories, intentions and actions, wishes and their fulfilments cannot reasonably be judged to be psychologically continuous or connected simply because they are strikingly similar, or even because, from the inside, they *feel* connected. The right response to someone born in 1964, who claims to remember the Battle of Waterloo, is not naïvely to take this up as evidence for metempyschosis. It is simply to point out to him that he can't have experienced it, because he didn't even exist then. The only reasonable basis for judging that anything is R-related to anything else is its occurrence in the life-story of the same person, where there is more than mere psychology "as felt from the inside" to our criteria for sameness of person. We have to know how to individuate and reidentify persons before we can know how to individuate and reidentify their components.

Does this conclusion mean that, when a brain is split, I must make an arbitrary all-or-nothing choice, and say that one of the resulting spheres of consciousness is accurate in everything it remembers, while the other half is massively deluded in what it only seems to remember? No: all I have to say is that if there are indeterminacies here, then they are indeterminacies about *both* the question whether we have the same person, *and* the question whether we have psychological continuity or not. (This is so whether these indeterminacies take the form of unanswerable questions, as the epistemicist thinks, or are genuine vaguenesses, as other philosophers think.) To repeat, the claim is not that there cannot be empty-question cases about persons. The claim is only that any empty-question cases about *persons* will also and equally be empty-question cases about person-*components*. If this claim is right then EQA2, with (2.3.5) negated, can be deployed against Parfit to show that person-components have no metaphysical privilege over persons. In fact, persons and their components are subject to exactly the same sorts of indeterminacies.

To sum up my discussion of the Empty Question Argument. If epistemicism is the right way to deal with vagueness, then there will be no empty questions about personal identity, or anything else for that matter (even if there are questions to which we can never know the answers). But if epistemicism is not the right way to deal with vagueness, it's still true that the only method we have for individuating and identifying the psychological components of persons depends constitutively on our method for individuating and identifying persons themselves. So whether there are genuine empty questions about personal identity or only unanswerable ones, every such question about personal identity will correlate with a question about R-relatedness. Therefore, Parfit shows no sense in which R-relatedness is any less prone than personal identity to an Empty Question Argument. So Parfit gives us no reason to think that (2.3.2) and (2.3.5) are both true. So he does not prove (2.3); which, in turn, means that he does not prove (2); which, finally, means that his argument for reductionism fails.

This looks like a purely negative and critical conclusion. In fact, there are important positive lessons to be learnt from the failure of Parfit's metaphysical arguments for reductionism. I close this section by drawing out these lessons a little further.

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As I have argued already, the most fundamental problem with these arguments is their assumption that it could make sense to treat items like experiences and memories as if they could exist on their own, and not as properties of something else to which they are related adjectivally. My claim is that this procedure is at best only apparently intelligible: we cannot individuate experiences except by reference to an experiencer. Then how are we to individuate experiencers? We can't, without circularity, do this by reference to their experiences: so we have to find a way of picking them out and referring to them that is non-experiential.

I have said nothing here about which theories of the mind will succeed in passing this test. The best known non-experiential ways of individuating consciousness are the ways taken by physicalism, the view that consciousness is individuated via some physical object, and animalism, the view that consciousness is individuated via some biological substance. (The latter is my own view.[15])

A third possibility would be to individuate consciousness by linking it with an immaterial substance such as a soul. But first, this possibility faces familiar and daunting epistemological problems. And second, consciousness can only be thus individuated if we say that the soul is something *over and above* its own thinking. For if we do not say that, then we face the same circularity again. We are back in the position of trying to individuate experiencers by reference to their experiences, in defiance of the fact that those experiences need a prior individuation by reference to their experiencer.

This immediately implies that Descartes' theory of the mind cannot find an adequate way of individuating experiencers. As every (French) schoolboy knows, Descartes' key move is precisely to deny that the soul is anything over and above its own thinking. (See Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, Part IV, CSM I, p.127: "From this [self-examination] I knew that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think.") Descartes' most fundamental mistake was exactly the mistake of thinking that private objects such as experiences can be, directly and immediately, objects of public reference. Given his repeated rejections of Descartes, it is perhaps ironic that Parfit's theory of the mind ultimately founders on the same point. In John McDowell's words,

> "We can see a Cartesian structure in Parfit's reductionism itself... a context of facts about the objective continuation of lives... figures in Parfit's picture only as the 'normal cause' of a less rich content which is supposed to be... tailor-made to seem entertainable, like the Cartesian *cogito*, without objective presuppositions. A phrase like 'serial co-consciousness' [see RP, e.g. section 101] can indeed be understood to fit 'facts with which we are familiar'; but the familiar fact is that a person experiences his life from within as the career of a single objective subject, and it looks like a Cartesian thought that, in order to consider the content of the familiar experience as it really is, we must purify it of involvement with an objective context"

> "A deep element in a broadly Cartesian outlook is an inability to conceive of 'cogitation' as part of something as 'merely' natural... as the life of an individual animal. This inability is manifested in the Cartesian segregation of 'cogitation' into a special realm of reality. It deserves sympathy, even if we manage not to share it; it reflects powerful pressures on us to conceive the world of nature in a way that resists fitting rationality into it... I think we can understand [Parfit's] thinking as a reflection of that felt tension between reason, and hence mind, and 'mere' nature... the [Cartesian] tendency shows in his refusal to let the space of reasons be structured by the natural

continuities of human life... I think Parfit's position belongs in a long series of philosophical distortions imposed on reflection about reason and human life by our having forgotten, intelligibly by all means, how to maintain a firm and integrated conception of ourselves as rational animals" (McDowell (1997) pp. 233-234, 247-248).

2. PERSONS IN TIME: ETHICS

So far I have argued that Parfit gives us no good metaphysical argument for preferring a reductionist attitude to the existence of persons to an eirenic or an inclusive attitude. But mightn't other sorts of reasons be offered for preferring the reductionist attitude? Even if Parfitians[16] accepted the arguments just given against metaphysical reductionism, mightn't they argue like this for ethical reductionism?—

> (ER) All that's been shown to date is that persons and R-relata are metaphysically 'on the same footing.' Even if we accept that, we're still free to argue that there are good reasons of a non-metaphysical sort for preferring to concentrate on R-relata and ignore persons. For instance, there might be ethical reasons for such a preference.

In the rest of this essay I consider three possible arguments for (ER), from (a) *the advantages of division*, (b) *liberation from the self*, and (c) *integrity*.

(a) The advantages of division

> "Instead of regarding division [into two separate continuants of my experience] as being somewhat worse than ordinary survival, I might regard it as being better. The simplest reason would be... the doubling of the years to be lived. I might have more particular reasons. Thus there might be two life-long careers both of which I strongly want to pursue. I might strongly want both to be a novelist and a philosopher. If I divide, each of the resulting people could pursue one of these careers..." (Parfit (1984) p. 264).

Personal division, says (a), is a possible way of having my time again, or of resolving dilemmas by having my time twice at the same time. This possibility makes for a better ethics by bringing a hopeful prospect into view. So the possibility of personal division counts in favour of (ER).

However, problem-solving by division seems impossible for at least three reasons. First, any close psychological continuant of me presumably shares my psychological characteristics. But then if I am—pardon the phrase—torn between two alternative careers, my closest successors should inherit the whole of this indecision from me, not one half each. A person divided between two ambitions is in a *single* mental state, that of indecision, not in a conjunction of two different mental states neither of which is indecision. There isn't even in principle a line along which e.g. a surgeon might cut to get the neat division and deconditionalisation of previously conflicting wishes which division requires.

Second, why should half-me A think that he's given any reason to choose life-plan A over life-plan B by the mere fact that half-me B has chosen life-plan B; or

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even by the fact that life-plan A was what I intended for half-me A? What has anyone *else's* choice got to do with A's decision over life-plans?

The third reason why it's impossible to solve decision problems by division applies only if we accept both *objectivism* and *pluralism* about the good.[17] Granting those assumptions, as Parfit evidently does,[18] it is the most decisive reason of these three. Objectivism about the good is the belief that to say that "There is a good or goods" is to state a fact of some sort. Pluralism about the good is the belief that practical choice is between many different, multiply instantiable goods. If we accept these beliefs, we may perhaps grant that conflicts between subjective preferences can be resolved by division. But we must deny that division can also resolve conflicts between objective ethical values.

Objective values apply to each and every moral agent in the same way. Every moral agent is equally confronted by just as many different goods, and just as many different instantiations of each good. Hence division makes no difference to the structure of ethical choices. Since all post-division selves have all the same goods to choose between as pre-division selves had, division doesn't prevent opportunities for dilemma. It multiplies them, by multiplying the number of people who face them.

Division could resolve a dilemma between (Parfit's example: (1984) p. 264) a lifetime as a novelist and a lifetime as a philosopher only if no objective goods were in conflict in such a choice. Objectivism says that there *are* objective goods in conflict in such a choice (or there can be). My incompatible desires to be a novelist and to be a philosopher can both be grounded, not just in my psychology's quirks, but in my responsiveness to the different goods confronting me. My dilemma then isn't only structured by my desires; it is also, and more deeply, structured by the goods which ground those desires. Even if I do divide, each of the resulting people is still equally subject to the rational "pulls" of those two different goods—and so no more able than me to solve the dilemma by any rational means.[19]

Still, the dilemma might be solved by irrational means. I could e.g. ensure somehow that one of the resultant selves has the appropriate beliefs, aptitudes and desires, whichever those are, only for a career as a novelist, while the other resultant self has the appropriate beliefs (etc.) only for a career as a philosopher. But *which* career as a philosopher? A career in (say) philosophy of mind, or in philosophy of mathematics? Both careers have value of quite different sorts; so there could be a dilemma between them too, as before. We might perform another division to solve this dilemma, but then the same question applies again: if a career as a philosopher of mind is my choice, which one?

There seems no end to this regress of divisions. The reason why is in the structure of pluralism, which has the ethical choices available to any agent forming a mathematically dense array. Given pluralism, there are indefinitely many different goods around for an agent to choose between; and uncountably many different ways of instantiating those goods within a life. So at no level of individuation of lives does it become clear that the possibility of dilemmas between different lives has faded out of the picture.

Suppose this can be got round. Suppose it is at least a logical possibility that iterated Parfitian divisions might (at possibly infinite length) lead to a situation where, for any member L of this set of all possible ethical lives, one of the resultant selves has the necessary moral beliefs, aptitudes and desires for nothing but L. Even then, notice first what we haven't gained, and second, what we have lost.

We haven't gained a reason for thinking that this scenario anywhere shows an agent with a full and rational responsiveness to every good. It's true that the original self has ensured—conceivably on purpose—that every instantiation of every good will be responded to by some successor self of hers. But it's also true that the original self has ensured that every one of her successor-selves will lack choices and forms of responsiveness to good which she herself has, by making sure that they lack the necessary beliefs etc. to pursue options which they aren't 'designed' to pursue. This means that all such successor selves are desensitised to certain sorts of good (increasingly so desensitised, the closer one gets down the R-relations towards the terminal selves) and thus that all such successor selves lack full responsiveness to the kinds of good there are. It also means, apparently, that the original self has deliberately so desensitised all her successors. But there seems to be something morally dubious about this process of progressive ethical self- (or selves-) anaesthesia.

Connectedly, what we have lost comes down to two items. The first is the idea that anything might *depend* on ethical choice. Since all ethical options are realised somewhere in the family tree of selves—and since therefore no instantiation of value can ever be lost—ethical choices for successor-selves in the scenario are never important in a way that such choices are always important for us. More radically (the second missing item), it's dubious whether there are *any* real ethical choices in the scenario once it has begun. It's part of the hypothesis[20] that, beyond the original self's choice to begin the process, every self in the process has no serious alternative to the path which it actually pursues. At the limit, each terminal successor-self is responsive to only one instantiation of good, and deaf to the goodness of every other possible life. But then such selves don't choose the lives they live; they roll into them like marbles into slots. For such selves there is no gap between moral capacity and moral actuality. Put another way, such selves buy freedom from dilemmas at the price of freedom.[21]

(b) Liberation from the self

> "[Since] I changed my view [from non-reductionism to reductionism]... there is still a difference between me and other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others. When I believed the non-reductionist view, I also cared more [that after] my death, there will be no one living who will be me... [But] instead of saying 'I shall be dead', I should say, 'There will be no future experiences that will be related, in certain ways, to these present experiences'. Because it reminds me what this fact involves, this redescription makes this fact less depressing. Suppose next that I must undergo some ordeal. Instead of saying, 'The person suffering will be me', I should say, 'There will be suffering that will be related, in certain ways, to these present experiences'... the redescribed fact seems to me less bad." (Parfit (1984) pp. 281-282).

This argument cites two ethical advantages of reductionism which Parfit thinks aren't shared by non-reductionism, to do with *egoism* and *fear of the future*.

No doubt the non-reductionist can't argue against *egoism* as the reductionist recommends. But there are plenty of other ways of arguing against it. Since you don't need to be a reductionist to argue against egoism, reductionism is only corroborated by our felt need to refute egoism if no such argument is plausible.

As for *fear of the future*: undoubtedly people who haven't signed up for any philosophical view about personal identity do fear death and pain. Given that fact, we might find in Parfit's remarks the dilemma that his proposed redescriptions are either inaccurate or comfortless. Suppose I find less to frighten me in the idea that "There will be no future experiences that will be related in certain ways to these present experiences" than in the idea that "I am going to die." We might say that this can only be because I *don't* think that these ideas mean the same. If Parfit persuades me that they *do* mean the same, maybe I'll decide that they are equally frightening too. Or we might say that it doesn't make much difference to such fears whether non-reductionism or reductionism is true. If it is reasonable for a non-reductionist to fear the end of the person which he believes he is, why isn't it reasonable for a reductionist to fear the end of the set of R-relations which he believes he is?

Parfitians may rejoin that all this misses the point. What is the ground of any person's fear of death or pain? Surely his perception that something bad is going to happen *to him*. Reductionism can make a difference to this perception by undermining the meaningfulness of the words "to him."[22] Once he sees that there's not much more reason to fear future pain "to him" than there is to fear any other future pain he will, in Parfit's phrase, be "liberated from himself."

Even if we accept this, we may still wonder whether it shows that reductionism is a more cheery position than non-reductionism, and so has the edge over it ethically. If unravelling the self lessens our fears, presumably it also lessens our hopes. If reductionism decreases my unhappiness by detaching me from expected pain, presumably it also decreases my happiness by detaching me from expected pleasure.

In any case the argument doesn't show that reductionists have less reason to fear (or hope for) the future than non-reductionists. What it shows is that a reductionist has less reason than a non-reductionist to fear the future *because it will be bad for him*. But this isn't a reductionist attitude to the future anyway. The reductionist's attitude to the future isn't that it will be good or bad *for him*. It is that it will be good or bad *for someone*. This certainly means that the reductionist lacks a reason which the non-reductionist has for fearing the future, arising from the non-reductionist's concern for himself. Conversely, it also means that the reductionist has a reason which the non-reductionist doesn't have to fear *anyone's* pain or death (including his own), arising from the reductionist's concern for any future self. (Unless the reductionist is merely callous about suffering; which he's presumably meant not to be.) Hence reductionism can't reduce the total amount of fear of the future. At most reductionism redistributes that amount. (Similar points apply to hope.) If this means an increase in empathy, no doubt that's a good thing. Whether such increases in empathy are *only* possible if we adopt reductionism is, as with the refutation of egoism, surely a different question.

A different point about both of the alleged ethical advantages of reductionism discussed so far is their inconsistency with the third advantage, integrity. That it has room for points about integrity really is an advantage of reductionism (as of any other position that has this room). But this advantage can't be argued for in the same breath as the alleged advantages of division and liberation from the self.

(c) Integrity

> "On the non-reductionist view, the deep unity of each life is automatically ensured, however randomly, short-sightedly, and passively this life is lived. On the reductionist view, the unity of our lives is a matter of degree, and is something that we can affect. We may want our lives to have greater unity, in the way that an artist may want to create a more unified work. And we can *give* our lives greater unity... [in this respect] the reductionist view gives more importance [than non-reductionism] to how we choose to live, and to what distinguishes different people." (Parfit (1984) p. 446).

I'm happy to agree that what Parfit calls "the unity of our lives," and I call integrity, is an ethically crucial notion. Recall the conflicts between goods which I, following Parfit, examined above. The choice between the different lives of a philosopher and a novelist is, says objectivism, not just a decision between subjective preferences, but also between objective goods. Moreover (says pluralism), such goods can be reconciled or commensurated only to a degree. Decisions like the novelist-or-philosopher choice aren't made algorithmically, by deciding which way we should go to maximise the good. It is a corollary of Pluralism that in such decisions no maximising algorithm is available.[23]

So there arises what I have elsewhere called the Problem of Reconciliation:[24] how are such decisions to be made if not by attempting to maximise? What *other* kind of rationality could they have? Aren't they, really, just irrational or random? The concept of integrity can be used to answer this. We can reply that the rational agent typically seeks to give her life a clear narrative unity and shape by her choices among goods. So her choice between novel-writing and philosophy can be made, not by asking "Which of these two lives is better?", but by asking "Which of these two kinds of person do I want to be?".

The agent seeks, in either alternative, to create a fitting way of carrying on the narrative of her own life, and to give it the organisation and shape of a certain sort of story. Choosing like this isn't choosing by reference to any maximising criterion. But it isn't choosing randomly or irrationally either. Such ethical choices aren't so much like comparisons of two measurements as like choices about how to carry on a story. But carrying on a story is no less a rational process than measuring is.

Integrity in this sense isn't a dispensable objective for a rational person. Parfit writes that "We *may* want our lives to have greater unity, in the way that an artist *may* want to create a more unified work." But a work of art which lacks any real unity is just a mess. So a good artist necessarily seeks to give his work unity. Unity may not be the only canon of artistic excellence; but it is one of the canons. Likewise the integrity, the achieved narrative unity, of a person's life isn't the only thing which is needed to make it a good life; but it is one of the things. We may sometimes want our lives to have *greater* unity—or we may not, depending on circumstances.[25] But if we're rational at all, we must want our lives to have *a high*

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degree of unity. As Parfit rightly says, the alternative is randomness, short-sightedness, and passivity.

If integrity is a necessary condition for a good human life, there is an inevitable conflict between this ethical advantage of reductionism and the other two alleged advantages concerning self-division and liberation from the self. If there can't be a good life without a conscious effort on the agent's part to make as much connection as she possibly can between the different (temporal and other) parts of that life, it can't be consistent with this effort for the agent to encourage herself to reflect that future pains matter less because she isn't deeply connected to them, as she would be if non-reductionism were true. Again, if a life can't be a good life without a high degree of narrative unity, it can't be a good one if it divides in two. Choices between different ways my life could go are constitutive of my character—of my *identity* (in the non-strict sense of that word). To try to choose *both* options by splitting and becoming both a philosopher and a novelist is to find a way of ducking what is certainly a hard choice. But it is also to respond to an interesting and important opportunity for self-definition by giving up the project of being yourself altogether. And as Christine Korsgaard has noted—albeit from a rather different philosophical viewpoint from my own—that project is simply not one that we are rationally at liberty to set aside.

> "Unless persons are separately existing entities, Parfit supposes, the ascription of actions to persons is a matter of mere grammatical convenience. The Kantian reply is that neither metaphysics nor grammar is the basis for such ascriptions. Rather, the conception of ourselves as agents is fundamental to the standpoint of practical reason, the standpoint from which choices are made. And it is from this standpoint that we ask moral questions, and seek help from moral philosophy. This makes the conception of the agent, along with its unity, an appropriate one to employ in moral thinking. In fact, it is from the standpoint of practical reason that moral thought and moral concepts—including the concept of the person—are generated." (Korsgaard (1996) pp. 387-388)

NOTES

1 I have written about Parfit before: Chappell (1995), (1997), and (1998) especially chapters. 4.2 and 5. What I say here is not strictly identical to, although it is continuous with, the arguments of Chappell (1998). The relation to Chappell (1995) is more distant. I wanted to argue there that there could be empty questions about R-relatedness. I now think the truth is more complicated: see pp.198-199.

2 Parfit refers us to Lichtenberg (1971) p. 412.

3 Cp. Strawson (1959) p. 102: "States of consciousness could not be ascribed at all, unless they were ascribed to persons, in the sense I have claimed for this word."

4 Dickens (1854).

5 In 1996 Parfit himself kindly sent me over a hundred pages of his own drafts defending and developing the views of *Reasons and Persons*. This argument for reductionism is from p. 62 of those drafts; it comes in the course of a response to McDowell (1997). So far as I can see this argument could equally well have been made out in *Reasons and Persons*. Compare another of Parfit's formulations of the case for reductionism:
"(A) When experiences at different times are all had by the same person, either this fact consists in other facts, or it does not. (B) If this fact consists in other facts, some Reductionist view is true. (C) If this fact does not consist in any other facts, persons must be entities of the kind believed in by Metaphysical Non-Reductionists. Therefore (D) either persons are such entities, or some

Reductionist view is true. But (E) persons are not such entities. Therefore (F) some Reductionist view is true."

6 It probably isn't important to the basic structure of Parfit's argument that it comes in two different versions, one about *facts* of one sort "just consisting" in facts of another sort, the other about *things* of one sort "just consisting" in things of another sort. Nonetheless, the distinction should be noticed.

7 For example by Loux (1978) chapter 4, and by Jackson (1977).

8 "...parodying Quine, we might add that it is only 'a popular and misleading manner of speaking' to say that there is some one thing which *F*-ness, *G*-ness and *H*-ness all have in common when *a* is *F* and *G* and *H*" (Mellor and Oliver, (1997) p.15; for Quine, (1997) pp.74-88).

9 The bracketed addition rules out the eirenic response.

10 The bracketed addition rules out the eirenic response.

11 At least, it is an example of an empty question if you understand it as I do here, as meaning "What is the minimum length for anything to count as a piece of string?". The question can also be understood as meaning "What is the *unique* length that any piece of string must have?". Taken the latter way, the question is not unanswerable because it is an empty question, but because of its false presupposition that there is such a unique length. (False, at least, until the European Directive on String Length comes out.)

12 Statement adapted and simplified from Chappell (1995) p. 89. Parfit himself has seen this statement of the Empty Question Argument. So far as I know he has no objection to it.

13 The classic statement of the epistemic view of vagueness is Williamson (1994).

14 *Pace* Quinton (1962). (Like some other writers, Quinton thinks that character-swaps *might* be taken as person-swaps. Because I think the relation of psychological "entities" to their "possessor" is adjectival, this just seems a mistake to me.)

15 For some of my arguments for that view see Chappell (1997), and (1998), chapter 4.

16 I don't imply that *Parfit* ever argues like this; only that he could do so even if he accepted the arguments I give against metaphysical reductionism.

17 In Chappell (1998) I defend both objectivism (2.4) and pluralism about the good (2.2).

18 *RP* Appendix I's "Objective List theory," which Parfit tentatively accepts in combination with what he calls "hedonism" (*RP* p. 502), is apparently both pluralist and objectivist.

19 But what *would* count as a rational means of solving such a dilemma? My own account of that, going under the name of *Narrative Rationality*, begins to appear in the last part of this paper. More about it in Chappell (1998) chapters 5-6.

20 Because it is by the options actually taken that the paths, and the selves pursuing them, are individuated.

21 Cp. Slote (1989) p. 46: "Consider... a child at primary school who plans to go to a certain medical school and become a surgeon. [Such children's] vast predetermination is likely to seem suspect... If the child's father went to that medical school and is a surgeon, we shall wonder whether the child doesn't feel some sort of more or less explicit pressure to be like his father which one hopes will eventually dissolve. And will we not think that his plan may well collapse when he does go to college, or before, and, more to the point, that if it does not, that will mean that he is probably not allowing life to influence or change him, that he is too rigid? His planfulness will in that case prove positively detrimental to his development: it will prevent him from seeing, for example, whether he might not prefer pure science, or the law, to medicine, or prefer another branch of medicine, in the light of subsequently uncovered and developed interests and talents."

22 I ignore the possibility that reductionism might be meant to abolish the fear of death altogether. Even if this is right (there's little evidence that it is) the problem I indicate still arises regarding future pain.

23 *Pace* Hurka (1993) chapter 6.

24 See Chappell (1998) chapter 3.

25 Maybe I hold that my life so far has *too much* unity—e.g. the unity of someone who breaks the law all the time. So maybe I want a clean break from my criminal past, or even what detective novels call "a change of identity." Fine, but this doesn't show that narrative integrity isn't a necessary condition of a good human life; just that it isn't a sufficient condition.

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