WHAT MATTERS? ON PARFIT’S IDEAS OF PERSONAL IDENTITY AND MORALITY

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Although I am in basic agreement with Parfit’s negative assessment of traditional Non-Reductionist theories of personal identity, I have, as this essay will make clear, some serious reservations about the ethical implications that he draws from his critique. Starting with a brief reformulation of some of Parfit’s more salient conclusions, I articulate these reservations in a critical discussion of the normative claims made in section 14 and 15 of Parfit’s Reasons and Persons.

I

Personal identity over time is not a question about a deep further fact like the existence of a Cartesian ego. Instead Parfit maintains that:

“Our identity over time just involves (a) Relation R – psychological connectedness and/or psychological continuity, either with the normal cause or with any cause, provided (b) that there is no different person who is R-related to us as we once were.” (p. 216)

Although I would prefer to speak of ‘Relation R*’, i.e. ‘socio-psychological connectedness and/or socio-psychological continuity, either with the normal cause or with any cause’, I basically think Parfit’s definition of personal identity is a step in the right direction. Given this definition, a person can cease to exist in either two ways: He may die or he may divide. We are therefore left with the following position:

Persons are such entities, whose identity through time just involves the relation R provided there is no different person who is R-related to us as we once were. For such entities there are three borderline cases: A numerically self-identical life; splitting up; death.
II

Since traditional theories of rational self-interest, moral deserts, commitments and responsibilities presuppose the indivisibility of persons, we are forced to reconsider these theories in the light of Parfit’s new concept of a person. In section 14 and 15 he dissociates himself from a radical argument based upon two so-called “extreme claims” about respectively self-interest and morality:

(1) If we have any reason to be concerned about our own future, persons must have more than just a parfian identity.⁵
(2) If we have any commitments or responsibilities, or if there is such a thing as desert, persons must have more than just a parfian identity.⁶

But on Parfit’s account:

(3) Persons have only a parfian identity.

Therefore,

(4) We have no reason to be concerned about our own future, and there is no such thing as desert, commitment and responsibility.

Parfit thinks that (1) and (2) are defensible, but so are their denials (pp. 311, 326). Instead he defends what he calls two “moderate claims”:

(1*) If we are going to have unreduced reason to be concerned about our own future, persons must have more than just a parfian identity.
(2*) If we have unreduced commitments, responsibilities or unreduced reasons to punish or give rewards, persons must have more than just a parfian identity.

These two premises are then combined with his own assumption:

(3) Persons have only a parfian identity.

Therefore,