

19. Parfit 1971, What matters in survival

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We all agree that sometimes answers to questions of (e.g.) *ship* identity can be indeterminate or unimportant.

Theseus replaces 50% of the planks; is it the same ship?

It's tempting to think that *personal* identity is different—to think that personal identity is what matters in survival and persistence.

If someone's going to be tortured, surely there's an (important!) answer to the question of whether it's *you*. Likewise: "uploading your mind". Likewise: "immortality" procedure.

This felt importance of personal identity is what grounds *rational self-concern* (including a fear of death).

Parfit: this is wrong. Personal identity is not what matters in survival.

Brain transplant. Your right brain is destroyed, but your left brain is successfully transplanted into a new (brainless) body. It retains all your memories, personality characteristics, hopes, dreams etc.

Clearly you survive this procedure.

Double transplant. Your right brain and left brain are each transplanted into two different brainless bodies, so there are two people ('Righty' and 'Lefty') who share your memories, personality characteristics, hopes, dreams, etc.

If personal identity is what matters, what should we say?

- 1) You do not survive the operation.
- 2) You survive as Righty but not Lefty.
- 3) You survive as Lefty but not Righty.
- 4) You survive as both Lefty and Righty.

But you *do* survive Brain Transplant. Could a double-success be a failure?

(2) and (3) are objectionably arbitrary!

Failures of transitivity! Lefty = You, and You = Righty, but Lefty \neq Righty.

Parfit: none of these answers are acceptable.

Reject the presupposition. Personal identity is not what matters in survival. So (1) is true—there is no one after the operation who is identical to you—but nevertheless, the result is *as good as* survival.

What matters? Psychological continuity and connectedness. Recall:

A at t_1 is *psychologically connected* to *B* at t_2 iff *A* and *B* share many desires, beliefs, (quasi-)memories, and other mental states, and *A*'s mental states cause *B*'s mental states.

A at t_1 is *psychologically continuous* with *B* at t_2 iff *A* at t_1 is psychologically-connected to someone who's psychologically-connected to someone who's... (etc.) who's psychologically connected to *B* at t_2 .

Parfit thinks that (much of) what matters is psychological connectedness—and this is a *matter of degree*. Consider:

K-Transformer: I enter a transformer with a knob that ranges between 0 and 1. When set to 0 it does nothing. When set to 1 it zaps me into a physical and psychological duplicate of Kim Kardashian. When set to 0.01 it replaces 1% of my physiology and psychology with Kim Kardashian's. Etc.

If we set the knob to 0 or 0.00001, it is me.

And is as good as survival.

If we set the knob to 1 or 0.99999, it's not me.

And is as bad as death.

So there must be some point at which it switches from being me to not being me. But this "cross-over point" can't be a difference that matters!

There is no unique psychological or physical characteristic of me that is itself what makes me *me*.

How should I feel about the prospect of entering the K-transformer? My feelings should shift continuously from "as good as survival" to "as bad as death" as we turn the knob up.

Why does this matter?

It shows us that in *our real lives*, we care about the wrong things.

Over your life, you will undergo massive psychological and physical changes. Take a snapshot of what you'll be like when you're 90; call that person Futury. Consider:

F-Transformer: You enter a transformer with a knob that ranges between 0 and 1. When set to 0 it does nothing. When set to 1 it zaps you into a physical and psychological duplicate of Futury. When set to 0.01 it replaces 1% of your physiology and psychology with Futury's. Etc.

Again: If set to 0.0001, it's (almost) as good as survival; if set to 0.99999, it's (almost) as bad as death.

But *real life* is just like, every day, stepping into a future-you-transformer set to 0.00001.

Parfit claims that what we intuitively want in survival is for there to be some further, deep fact which makes a future person *us*. But there is no such further fact—there *never* is. No future person will ever be you in the deep way we intuitively want them to be.

→ All you ever have are degrees of psychological connectedness.

Pessimistic read: it's like dying every second!

Optimistic read: *your* death, and the boundaries of *your* self, don't have the importance you think they do.