

Survival by Redescription: Parfit on Consolation and Death

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Abstract

Parfit argues that if we come to believe his theory of personal identity, we should care differently about the future. Amongst others, we can redescribe death in ways that make it seem less bad. I consider three challenges to his reasoning. First, according to the *Argument from Above*, a fact, event, or state of affairs can be good or bad independently of the value or disvalue of its constituents. Death could thus be bad even if R-relatedness matters *and* some degree of it is gets preserved. Second, I argue that the *Extreme Claim* and the *Moderate Claim* suggest that it is unclear whether what we are left with in Parfit's picture is less bad than death. Third, I propose that in light of the foregoing, we might still regard Parfit's redescription and its suggested effects on our concern as rationally permissible. However, I claim that rational permissibility does not fully deliver upon the promise that the redescription is also consoling. Despite these challenges, I conclude that Parfit has given us valuable prompts for reconsidering our attitudes towards death. He has set an inspiring example for how philosophical arguments can show us new ways of thinking about ourselves and our practical concerns.

Keywords: Parfit, Death, Concern, Personal identity, Rationality.

1. Introduction

Parfit argues that if we come to believe his theory of personal identity, we should care differently about the future. Amongst others, we can redescribe death in ways that make it seem less bad. In the following, I examine whether his theory lives up to this claim. I argue that despite a number of challenges to this project, his attitude towards death, while not *necessitated* by his views on personal identity, is indeed rationally *permissible*. Unfortunately, the mere permissibility of alternative ways of caring about the future is not exactly what we were hoping for when seeking consolation about the prospect of death.

My discussion will sidestep two broader issues. First, there is a long-standing debate about what exactly makes death bad for us. In the following, I stay neutral on this topic as far as possible. Second, Parfit and others have received criticism for suggesting that personal identity partly depends on the way

one describes the world (Olson 1997). In the following, I am not so much concerned with whether personal identity is a matter of description. Instead, I will focus on the question: *if* personal identity turns at least partly on descriptions, could this make death less bad?

2. Parfit's Liberation from the Self

Parfit believes that our attitudes towards death are entangled with beliefs about personal identity:

Egoism, the fear not of near but of distant death, the regret that so much of one's only life should have gone by—these are not, I think, wholly natural or instinctive. They are all strengthened by the beliefs about personal identity which I have been attacking. If we give up these beliefs, they should be weakened (Parfit 1971: 27).

According to Parfit, the truth about personal identity is that it consists in other relations. What makes a future self *my* future self is “the holding of certain more particular facts” (Parfit 1984: 210), in particular “the existence of a brain and body, and the occurrence of a series of interrelated physical and mental events” (Parfit 1984: 211). There is no “further fact” (Parfit 1984: 210) of personal identity.

Is the truth depressing? Some may find it so. But I find it liberating, and consoling. When I believed that my existence was such a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of 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 about my inevitable death. After my death, there will [be] no one living who will be me. I can now redescribe this fact. Though there will later be many experiences, none of these experiences will be connected to my present experiences by chains of such direct connections as those involved in experience-memory, or in the carrying of an earlier intention. Some of these future experiences may be related to my present experiences in less direct ways. There will later be some memories about my life. And there may later be thoughts that are influenced by mine, or things done as the result of my advice. My death will break the more direct relations between my present experiences and future experiences, but it will not break various other relations. This is all there is to the fact that there will be no one living who will be me. Now that I have seen this, my death seems to me less bad (Parfit 1984: 281).

Parfit suggests that according to his theory, there is no principled difference between our relation to others and our relation to our future selves. While direct experiential connections will come to a halt upon death, some future experiences will still be shaped by our present experiences through various other relations. Death thus seems *less bad*. He even specifies that death can be redescribed in ways that make it *disappear*.

Wolf makes another prediction. If we ceased to care about identity, we might “aspire to and accomplish less”. We might try to avoid any major psychological change, because such a change would seem in advance like “an early death”

(Wolf 1986: 712). But such changes do not seem to me like death. Indeed, when it is better described, even death does not seem like death. Instead of thinking, “I shall die,” I should think, “After a certain time, none of the experiences that occur will be connected, in certain ways, to these present experiences.” In this re-description my death seems to disappear (Parfit 1986: 837).

Later, he reiterates:

Consider the fact that, in a few years, I shall be dead. This fact can seem depressing. But the reality is only this. After a certain time, none of the thoughts and experiences that occur will be directly causally related to this brain, or be connected in certain ways to these present experiences. That is all this fact involves. And, in that re-description, my death seems to disappear (Parfit 1995: 45).

One obstacle towards interpreting these passages is Parfit’s own distinction between the way his theory would *actually* affect our attitudes and emotions on the one hand, and the *justifiedness* of its effects on the other (Parfit 1984: 308). Even upon coming to believe his theory of personal identity, Parfit finds that “I am still much more concerned than I would be about the future of a mere stranger” (Parfit 1984: 308), and wonders whether this attitude is justified. Given that he frames his discussion of death as “simply a report of psychological effects” (Parfit 1984: 282), this raises the question whether he merely reports an *actual* change in his attitudes, or whether he also seeks to argue that this change is *justified*. In the following, I assume that Parfit suggests that this change in attitudes is not mistaken, and that we might even have positive reasons for it in light of his account of personal identity.

Note that when Parfit says that given his theory, we have reason to care about relation R, i.e. psychological connectedness and/or continuity (Parfit 1984: 262), less reason to care about death, and more reason to care about others, the idea is not that a set of descriptive claims, e.g., his suggestion that personal identity consists in relations of physical or psychological continuity, would on its own entail certain normative claims, e.g., about the appropriateness of certain practical concerns. The idea is rather that instances of the latter build upon certain descriptive hypotheses. For example, when you hold me accountable for a past action, this practice might partly rest upon the descriptive supposition that I am identical to the person who carried out the wrongful action. When I care for a future self in a certain way, I do so on the basis of the supposition that this future self will be me. Parfit has a distinctive story to tell about what being me involves, and he is convinced that its details have implications for how we should care about the future.

Note also that against the backdrop of Parfit’s work, the term ‘death’ can be understood in two ways. First, it can refer to the cessation of what matters. This seems to be the intended meaning when he argues that it is absurd to regard fission as death (Parfit 1971: 9). Second, it can refer to the ending of what we might call I-relatedness (in the sense of Lewis 1976), e.g., through an attenuation or branching of relation R. This seems to be the intended meaning when he states that in the *Spectrum* cases, “[i]t is hard to believe that the difference between life and death could just consist in any of the very small differences” (Parfit 1984: 239). In my understanding, this is the relevant meaning of ‘death’ in the claim that death might not end what matters.

3. Challenge I: The Argument from Above

In Section 13 of *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit is concerned with *What Does Matter*. His central case is *Teletransportation*. We might refrain from describing my replica in *Teletransportation* as me.

If we do decide not to call my replica me, the fact
 (a) that my Replica will not be me
 just consists in the facts
 (b) that there will not be physical continuity, and
 (c) that, because this is so, R will not have its normal cause (Parfit 1984: 285-86).

Parfit believes that since (a) just consists in (b) and (c), the attitude towards (a) only depends on the attitude towards (b) and (c). He argues that (b) is unimportant to us. We value our psychological features in the first place, and “physical continuity is the least important element in a person’s continued existence” (Parfit 1984: 284). Neither can (c) be important to us. The effect of *Teletransportation*—the holding of relation R—is what matters, not the way it was brought about. Overall, (a) turns on facts for which Parfit thinks we should not care. But then we should not care about (a) either. As he paraphrases later:

[i]f one fact just consists in certain others, it can only be these other facts which have rational or moral importance. We should ask whether, in themselves, these other facts matter (Parfit 1995: 29).

One difficulty in this passage is that Parfit seems to be primarily *asserting*—rather than *arguing for*—the value of relation R and the unimportance of physical continuity. Still, we can follow his suggestion that assuming relation R is what matters, we need not care much about personal identity as long as relation R is preserved. To be clear, Parfit is not saying that *any* instance of personal non-identity depends on facts about which we should not care. Instead, he is arguing that if relation R is preserved and yet there is non-identity, the latter turns on facts for which we should not care. And with these suggestions at hand, it makes sense that if some kind of R-relatedness would be preserved beyond death, death would seem less bad.

Johnston (1997: 167-68) refers to Parfit’s reasoning as the *Argument from Below* since the value of a fact or entity is thought to flow from its lower-level constituents. If the latter lack importance, so does the former. Johnston argues that this is a mistake. Two points are particularly pressing. First, he thinks it is implausible—“a fallacious additive picture of values” (Johnston 1997: 167)—that the importance of a concept or the entity it picks out is divided among its constituents. Second, according to physicalism, all facts supervene on micro-physical facts. But since micro-physical entities themselves are of no non-derivative concern, Parfit’s argument from below combined with physicalism would result in *nihilism*: nothing matters (although cf. Pollock 2018: 289-91). This seems absurd. Together with Johnston’s positive arguments for the justifiedness of caring about personal identity (Johnston 1992: 599-600), these considerations motivate his case for arguing *from Above*: if (a) consists in (b) and (c), then (a) can matter even though (b) and (c) do not matter on their own, or—as they constitute (a)—matter only derivatively. “Brain-based realization of R, although not significant in itself, is of great derivative significance. For it is a nec-

essary condition for our continued existence” (Johnston 1992: 605). Personal identity might consist in facts that are unimportant non-derivatively. But this does not deflate the importance of personal identity.

In his response, Parfit seeks to clarify the scope of his *Argument from Below*. The argument is intended to apply when a constituted fact is distinct, but not independent or separate (Parfit 1995: 18-19, 2007: 4-5) from the facts that constitute it. According to Parfit, that there are trees on a hill and that there is a copse are distinct facts. But the copse is not independent of—or separate from—the trees on the hill. Similarly, facts about nations consist in facts about people, and facts about personal identity consist in facts about physical or psychological continuity.

Though statements about personal identity do not, on my view, mean the same as statements about physical or psychological continuity, these statements are, in a different and looser way, conceptually connected. [...] If we knew about those other facts [about physical and psychological continuity; P.H.], understood the concept of a person, and had no false beliefs about the kind of entity that persons are, we would know, or should be able to work out, any facts that there might be about the existence and identity of persons. We should be able to work out such facts because these would not be, in relation to those other facts, independent or separately obtaining (Parfit 2007: 35).

In such cases, we can mention the distinct but not independent or separate fact. Yet, “such claims would not tell us more about reality” (Parfit 1995: 20). This makes questions about copses, nations, or personal identity while knowing all facts about trees on hills, people, correlations of physical or psychological continuity *empty* questions: “Even without an answer, we could know the full truth about what happened” (Parfit 1995: 22). Answers to empty questions do not denote two different possibilities, but merely provide different descriptions of one and the same state of affairs. Parfit finds empty questions about personal identity uninteresting and, “in the belittling sense, merely verbal” (Parfit 1995: 25). In particular, if we know of the unimportance of the lower-level facts, why should it matter that a certain concept applies to them? We would be “treating language as more important than reality. We are claiming that even if some fact does not in itself matter, it may matter if and because it allows a certain word to be applied” (Parfit 1995: 32).

These ideas are at work in Parfit’s redescription of death as the ending of direct connectedness between experiences, which he suggests makes death disappear. Seemingly harmless facts about the relationship (or lack thereof) between certain present and future experiences provide a complete picture of reality. Applying the concepts or words *death* or *personal non-identity* does not make a difference at the level of reality, and hence should not make the prospect worse.

The case about physicalism, Parfit maintains, is different. At least some higher-level facts constituted by facts about fundamental particles *are* separate and make a difference at the level of reality:

It is not true for example that, if we knew how the particles moved in some person’s body, and understood our concepts, we would thereby know, or be able to work out, all of the relevant facts about this person. To understand the world around us, we need more than physics and a knowledge of our own language (Parfit 1995: 33).

Some physicalists might disagree and maintain that the alleged separate facts actually fully reduce to facts about fundamental particles and arrangements thereof. But let us grant that according to physicalism, the relation between fundamental and higher-level facts is unlike the relation between the copse and the trees on the hill. The point then is that the *Argument from Below* is not intended to apply. It only pertains to “cases where, relative to the facts at some lower level, some fact at a higher level is, in the sense that I have sketched, merely conceptual” (Parfit 2007: 36). In other cases where the higher-level facts *are* genuine differences in reality and more than just the result of a certain concept applying, Parfit is open to there being constituted facts that matter even though the constituting facts by themselves lack importance. In particular, the unimportance of fundamental particles does not motivate nihilism.

Johnston agrees that if the relation between constituted and constituting facts is conceptual, Parfit’s *Argument from Below* is sound. *Ex hypothesis*, the constituting facts provide a full picture of reality and thus capture all the facts, including those that matter. In the copse example,

there could be no distinctive value in facts about copses that was not found in the constituent facts about trees and bushes and their arrangement. We could drop all talk about copses and still capture everything that is valuable about them at the level of the arrangement of trees and bushes. [...] To run the argument from above in the case of a copse *would* be to be bewitched by words or concepts; it would be to think that using a word or a concept could itself add something of distinctive value to the (non literary) world (Johnston 2010: 313).

However, Johnston claims victory. The case of personal identity is actually *unlike* the case of the copse. The link between personal identity and facts of physical or psychological continuity is *not* conceptual. One indicator to this effect is that important pieces of evidence that elicit the nature of personal identity are *a posteriori*. Parfit himself refers to the lack of empirical evidence in order to dismiss non-reductionism. That personal identity consists in relations of physical or psychological continuity “cannot be known just thanks to reflection on our concepts and their relations. It does not hold just in virtue of our use of words” (Johnston 2010: 314).

The implication for death is the following. When deeming death less bad, Parfit can be taken to argue *from below*: death is not the end. It is merely *an attenuation of relation R*. While the higher-level fact initially appeared frightening, its analysis reveals that the prospect is less bad than anticipated. And with Johnston, we can respond *from above*: seemingly insignificant attenuations at the lower level are compatible with huge differences at the higher level. Relation R constitutes—or fails to constitute if sufficiently attenuated—higher-level facts of personal identity. In particular, this relation of constitution is not merely conceptual. We thus cannot argue *from below* and read off the value of the higher-level facts from the value of the lower-level facts. It might have some value that relation R continues, but the value or badness of the prospect of death is not exhausted by the value or badness of relation R and its attenuation. It might be extremely significant that relation R continues in a way that *fails* to sustain personal identity.

I have two points to make about the exchange between Parfit and Johnston. First, and *pace* Johnston, it is not clear to me that Parfit's consideration of empirical evidence establishes that for him, the relation between personal identity and physical or psychological continuity is such that the *Argument from Below* cannot be applied. Parfit (2007: 35) emphasizes that he is not proposing *analytical* reductionism about personal identity where statements about the constituted and constituting facts *mean* the same. We can agree with Johnston that for such a position, the relevance of empirical evidence would be questionable. Parfit, however, seeks to provide not a conceptual, but what he calls a *factual* analysis. As mentioned, his claim is that once facts of physical or psychological continuity are in place, facts of personal identity do not make a difference at the level of reality. And it seems fine to investigate empirically whether or not given one set of facts, obtainment of another set of facts requires a difference at the level of reality. Admittedly, this raises the question in what sense Parfit can speak of a *conceptual* connection between personal identity and physical and psychological continuity, if only "in a different and looser way" (*ibid.*) than according to analytical reductionism. But as quoted, his idea is that with the concept of personal identity at hand, we could work out facts of personal identity from facts of physical and psychological continuity. If the *Argument from Below* is sound for mere conceptual links without differences in reality, it seems Parfit could in principle be entitled to launch it here.

Second, *pace* Parfit and with a number of commentators, I am convinced that even under these circumstances, the *Argument from Below* need not be applied. Against Parfit's claim that his theory of personal identity affects how we should care about the future, Brink cautions that "our concern about some entity or property may attach to its *functional role* rather than to its metaphysical or compositional *analysans*" (Brink 1997a: 117). Similarly, referring to practices of compensation, accountability, and concern, Adams argues that "[t]he rationality of caring about personal identity in this complex network of ways [...] is established *within* a form of life to which they belong, by our finding that they *make sense*" (Adams 1989: 458). And reaffirming his initial *Argument from Above*, Johnston highlights that "the value of the constituted facts can come from their place in our lives, and not just from their constituent facts" (Johnston 2010: 310-11).

Sosa (1990: 306-13, 320-21) goes one step further and sympathizes with similar considerations even for *conceptual* analysis. In his discussion of whether non-branching is significant for what matters, he invites us to consider an agent who cares about receiving a cube, "yet cares not a bit whether it comes with twelve or with sixteen edges. [...] [O]ne might desire the analysandum without desiring the analysans. Small differences on the number of sides or edges may be trivial matters of no concern even though having a cube is a most cherished desire" (*ibid.*: 320). By analogy, one might value identity while not caring too much about its analysis, in particular the non-branching requirement, which by itself seems trivial and insignificant. Amongst Sosa's points is that when being confronted with a relevant analysis, it is just not clear that concern should "flow from analysans to analysandum, and never in the opposite direction" (*ibid.*: 321).

For a range of concepts, it is puzzling to think about how their place in our lives could straightforwardly flow from their analysis. Think of concepts like *being married*, *being a sister*, *brother*, *mother* or *father*, and maybe even *being a person*. The respective constitutive principles seem difficult to evaluate in isolation and

abstraction, and difficult to compare both amongst each other as well as to other principles. It seems admissible to structure concerns around these concepts simply because of the role they, or the entities picked out by them, play in our lifeworlds—even if one lacks a detailed story involving constitutive principles or conditions, let alone one that appears valuable.

In light of these points, there is something surprising about how Parfit talks about his distinct but not separate or independent facts. He claims that with the more particular facts and our concepts at hand, we could work out whether the latter apply to the former. In such cases, “[a]ll we could learn is how we use the concept of a person” (Parfit 2007: 35). This, however, seems far from unimportant. Learning such lessons about the usage and application of concepts can be extremely relevant to questions of practical importance—without necessarily amounting to bewitchment by words, as Parfit and Johnston fear. For example, by recognizing certain entities as being picked out by certain concepts, we can trace attitudes and ascriptions relevant to what we take to matter, and confer value upon some entities rather than others. In this process, concepts often need to be discovered, spelled out, and even negotiated (Plunkett 2015) before we can assess the value of states of affairs. This observation has at least three implications. First, it highlights that Parfit’s supposition that we are not mistaken about our concepts is an important oversimplification. Second, if concept application is preceded by processes of discovery, explication, and negotiation, then the question arises why in the course of applying concepts and getting clear about conceptual questions, we do not learn anything about reality. Third, the observation marks another systematic place in which consideration of empirical evidence can play important roles for debating conceptual questions: reflecting on such evidence can *reveal* to us certain features of our concepts or beliefs about our concepts. It can invite us to *modify* concepts or beliefs about them in light of the evidence. And it can be informative about whether there is anything out there to which a given concept *applies*.

Returning to the issue of death, recall Parfit’s announcement that “[a]fter my death, there will no one living who will be me. I can now redescribe this fact” (Parfit 1984: 281), and that in the redescription, “even death does not seem like death” (Parfit 1986: 837). Here, it appears somewhat tempting to read Parfit as receiving consolation from the mere fact that a different description of one and the same possibility is available: one in which the concept of death *disapplies*. I thus see two interpretative routes. First, if it is really the mere redescription that is supposed to be consoling, Parfit’s remarks on death can be seen as contradicting his own advice: they would treat language as more important than reality. Consolation comes from the mere option to refrain from applying a certain word or concept. It would suggest that he agrees that concept application can matter after all. Second, one obvious alternative is to assume that Parfit is speaking against the backdrop of his proposed theory which he thinks supersedes the naïve, non-reductionist picture. This would mean that from his perspective, we do have an important difference at the level of reality: absence of a further fact of personal identity. If this leads us to apply concepts differently, then these modifications do have a tangible basis. However, contrary to Parfit’s own framing, it then would not be a mere redescription that is purported to be consoling. Instead, it is a full-fledged difference at the level of reality.

Although I voiced my reservations about the details of Parfit’s and Johnston’s reasonings, my own view is thus something of a compromise between

them. I believe that Parfit has made a good case that reflecting upon what a particular phenomenon consists in, and coming to see the value or disvalue of what it consists in, *can* give us good reasons to re-evaluate our stance towards it. But Johnston and others have convinced me that the value or disvalue of an entity's constituents *need not* affect the value of what they constitute.

The insight that death consists merely in an attenuation of relation R can make death seem less bad. However, awareness of one's mortality might be so ingrained in the ways we lead our lives and care for ourselves that this redescription leaves its badness unaffected. We are not making a mistake if we agree that attenuation of relation R sounds less bad than dying, but continue to maintain the same attitudes towards the latter.

4. Challenge II: The Extreme and the Moderate Claim

So far, we have been assuming with Parfit that relation R matters, i.e. that it is a valuable and appropriate object of concern. He distinguishes two claims one might endorse in this regard.

The Extreme Claim: “[I]f the Reductionist View is true, we have no reason to be specially concerned about our own futures” (Parfit 1984: 307).

The Moderate Claim: “Relation R gives us a reason for special concern” (Parfit 1984: 311).

Later, he adds that according to what he now calls the *Moderate View* about what matters,

we have reason for special concern about any future person between whom, and ourselves now, there will be psychological continuity. And we have reason for such concern even if this future person will not be us (Parfit 2007: 22).

Parfit argues that both *Claims* are defensible. If one believes in deep further facts of personal identity, relation R might seem relatively unimportant. The *Extreme Claim* then makes sense. For example, in Swinburne's picture of fission, even if continuity relations branch symmetrically, the further fact of personal identity obtains for at most one of the offshoots. The other offshoot “will not be a mere stranger” (Parfit 1984: 309), and thus should not be treated by the fissioner like everyone else. But the fissioner should regard this offshoot as a “mere instrument” (Parfit 1984: 310), and can rationally will the offshoot's death if the latter threatens to interfere with the fissioner's projects. Within Swinburne's picture, continuity relations are not enough to motivate the kind of concern that he thinks tracks a deep further fact (although cf. Whiting 1986: 552; Wolf 1986: 707; Johansson 2007).

How can Parfit maintain that relation R is what matters *and* that the *Extreme Claim* is defensible? I take it that highlighting the importance of relation R is intended as descriptive about what we actually value upon careful reflection. In contrast, the *Claims* apply to a *meta*-question: whether we are justified in caring in these ways. Parfit grants that Swinburne could defensibly deny the latter.

Moreover, the *Extreme Claim* is also in principle defensible if one does *not* believe in deep further facts of personal identity. Parfit's insight from fission was that the relation to the offshoots is as good as ordinary survival. But this claim is

neutral on whether special concern is warranted in ordinary survival (Parfit 1984: 310-11). In contrast, the *Moderate Claim* could be motivated by highlighting that we care specially about people we love even without a deep further fact of personal identity between us and them. However, Parfit remains unsure if this does the trick:

Suppose I learn that someone I love will suffer great pain. I shall be greatly distressed by this news. I might be more distressed than I would be if I learnt that I shall soon suffer such pain. But this concern has a different quality. I do not anticipate the pain that will be felt by someone I love (Parfit 1984: 312).

He thus agrees that the *Moderate Claim* can be denied. In conclusion, he suspends judgement on which *Claim* is correct: “I have not yet found an argument that refutes either” (Parfit 1984: 312).

Whiting helpfully highlights that the *Extreme Claim* is actually ambiguous, and that we should thus think of it as “a family of claims” (Whiting 1986: 549). First, special concern for one’s future can be either irrational or merely not rationally required. Second, as an *absolute* claim, there is no reason at all to care about my future selves. As a *comparative* claim, there is no reason to care about our own futures more than about the futures of others.

I propose that we can further distinguish two different ways in which a future can be—as the *Claims* put it—‘our own’. First, my future could be lived by future selves who are I-related to my present self. Second, it could be lived by those future selves who are R-related to my present self.

With these distinctions at hand, it seems that the two *Claims* need not be in opposition. Parfit’s claim that relation R rather than identity is what matters appears to rest on a version of the *Extreme Claim* with regards to the first sense of ‘our own’: caring about I-related future selves, or caring about them more than about the future selves of others, is unjustified or not rationally required. In contrast, the suggestion that what does matter is relation R implies a version of the *Moderate Claim* in the second sense of ‘our own’: *pace* the absolute version of the *Extreme Claim*, I am justified in caring about R-related future selves; and *pace* the relative version, I am justified in caring specially about them relative to non-R-related future selves. Because of these mutual compatibilities between different versions, one might find that these *Claims* are less than ideal to carve up and to discuss the possible positions on the relation between Parfit’s theory of personal identity and practical matters such as future-directed concern.

Parfit’s remarks on death fit this pattern. They seem to undercut one version of the *Extreme Claim*: that we lack any reason whatsoever for future-directed concern. Another version is being affirmed: upon coming to believe Parfit’s theory, it makes sense to care less about one’s I-related selves and more about others. Moreover, Parfit’s consolation that after his death, his present experiences will be connected, if only indirectly, to future experiences, that there will be memories of his life and thoughts influenced by his, etc. indicates his affirmation of the *Moderate Claim* that we have reason to care about R-related future selves, and reason to care about them more than about non-R-related ones.

Others have taken up Parfit’s suggestion. Brink thinks that because intimates share and mutually shape experiences, beliefs, desires and actions, they are justified in regarding their individual interests as extended by the interests of the other (Brink 1997a: 126, 1997b: 141). Fission shows that psychological con-

tinuity is what extends a present self's interests forward in time. And since psychological continuity can obtain interpersonally, interests can also extend across persons. Fission is one instance of such extension. But there are more mundane ones, too. Intimate friends share experiences, beliefs, desires, ideals and actions, which mutually depend on those of the other. In contrast to fissioner and fission products, the shared mental lives of friends are shaped reciprocally rather than one-directionally. In this sense, Brink thinks that the closest analogue to fission is the parent-child relation: the child owes its existence and physical and psychological nature to the parents, just like the fission products owe their characteristics to the fissioner. In this way, even rational egoists get a "derivative but non-instrumental reason to be concerned about others" (Brink 1997a: 127). What Brink means is that an agent's consideration of the good of other, psychologically continuous beings is not just a useful means, but valuable for its own sake in virtue of being constitutive of the agent's own good (Brink 1997b: 147). The only reason to care more for oneself than for others is that psychological continuity and connectedness are stronger in the intrapersonal case. In an obituary note on the occasion of Parfit's death, Brink explains how Parfit's work made him realize that "there can be interpersonal psychological continuity that transcends the limits of one's own life, allowing us to make sense of Plato's claim in the *Symposium* that the right sort of interpersonal relationships can be a surrogate for immortality" (via Shoemaker 2017).

These versions of the *Moderate Claim* seem admissible. But with regards to death, the *Claim* is silent on two important questions: *how much* R-relatedness is necessary to secure what matters? And how much R-relatedness is left when we die? It is one thing to establish that Relation R gives us reasons for concern. It is another question whether enough of relation R is preserved beyond death to motivate and justify extensions of concern for 'our own' futures, and to face the prospect of death with less unease. Claiming that relation R rather than identity is what matters does not establish this. The badness of death remains unaffected if enough of whatever does matter comes to a halt. This is a possibility even if relation R could obtain across persons, continue in other people, and render them closer. A sufficient degree of R-relatedness might matter *just as much* as identity did in the old picture. While not entirely precise in their formulations, the *Claims* provide useful resources to critically examine our concerns and their presuppositions. But once again, Parfit's redescription turns out to be compatible with precisely the kind of concern we had prior to considering his picture of personal identity.

5.Challenge III: Rational Permissibility

I have argued that the *Argument from Below* and the *Argument from Above* both have their appeal, but suggested that when reflecting upon the redescription of death as a mere attenuation of R-relatedness, we are not making a mistake if we maintain the same attitudes towards death. The *Extreme Claim* and the *Moderate Claim* are certainly relevant towards evaluating whether relation R gives us reason for concern, and thus whether death could be less bad if relation R continues. But both seem to leave open whether what we are left with in Parfit's redescription is less bad than death.

I propose that in light of the foregoing, Parfit's redescription and its suggested effects on our concern—while not wholly conclusive—are most plausibly

regarded as rationally permissible. Whether a puzzling thought experiment, a transformation in real life, or death preserve enough of what we care about partly depends on our informed antecedent beliefs about what matters. As we have seen, Parfit's theory does provide a robust sense of what it means for a future to be 'my own', and contains an account of what ownership of future experiences amounts to. Given that there is this sense of what it takes for future selves to be mine, it does not seem unreasonable to maintain an immediate and urgent interest in their well-being. But Parfit's own pre-theoretical reasons for caring about the future in specific ways are lost upon coming to believe that personal identity consists in relation R. What he calls a deep further fact of personal identity is absent. As a consequence, any worries and anxieties tied to his previous belief in such facts can be discarded. Parfit's feeling of consolation and liberation upon coming to believe his theory of personal identity is comprehensible.

There might be a question whether within what Parfit calls Non-Reductionism, death could disappear, too. Cartesians could agree that if we know all facts about egos,

we would have all the empirical input that we need. If we knew about those other facts, understood the concept of a person, and had no false beliefs about the kind of entity that persons are, we would know, or should be able to work out, any facts that there might be about the existence and identity of persons (Parfit 2007: 35).

Death could then be redescribed as the absence of a future soul or ego which is directly connected to the present self. If so, there is something misleading about how Parfit markets his theory, and the possibility of redescribing death and modifying our concerns in the ways he suggests was available to us all along. Other theories, in particular those he calls non-reductionist, can accommodate quite similar ideas (Hummel 2017).

Still, Parfit has given us new prompts for reconsidering our attitudes towards death. He arguably did not demonstrate that everyone must react to the prospect of death in the proposed way. The changes in the attitudes he reports are not *necessitated* by his views on personal identity. But they appear rationally permissible.

One problem is that when thinking about and anticipating future events that involve pain and death, the *consolation* upon learning that we are rationally permitted to care less is limited. It is good news that I could describe death away and still be considering a complete description of the world, that I could care only about relation R and not about looming non-identity, and that I could come to regard interpersonal variants of relation R as extending my survival. But when seeking relief, I was looking for not just the permissibility of these redescrptions and modifications of concerns. Instead, I was hoping for positive reasons in their favour, providing reassurance that the prospects are better than feared.

The mere rational permissibility of the redescription might fall short of fully delivering upon the promise of consolation, and something similar goes for the suggestion that coming to believe the picture is *liberating*. Being liberated does involve the permission to do as one pleases. But having the permission to describe one's confinement away is not enough. In Parfit's terms, what one hopes for is not something at the level of words, but at the level of reality: that one's

restraints are lifted. The view that personal identity consists in physical or psychological continuity might mark a difference in reality relative to pictures involving souls or egos. But just like its competitors, it is compatible with a variety of ways of caring about ourselves, the future, and others. In one sense, coming to see this might be a liberation, but there remains a question in what sense this liberation should be unattainable within alternative pictures of personal identity. In another sense, the liberation leaves something to be desired because the new picture still contains analogues to death and the separateness of persons that were previously perceived to constitute imprisonment in the glass tunnel.

6. Conclusion

Admittedly, it is a demanding requirement for a philosophical theory that it provides consolation and liberation in view of the prospect of death. Parfit does not shy away from challenges of this magnitude. His work demonstrates how philosophical arguments can show us new ways of thinking about ourselves and our practical concerns.

I have discussed three challenges to his suggestion that if we accept his view of personal identity, death might be less bad. First, according to the *Argument from Above*, a fact, event, or state of affairs can be good or bad independently of the quality of its constituents. Death could thus be bad even if R-relatedness matters and some degree of it is preserved. Second, the *Extreme Claim* and the *Moderate Claim* suggest that it is unclear whether what we are left with in Parfit's redescription of death is less bad than death. That relation R gives us reason for special future-directed concern does not settle whether enough R-relatedness will be preserved. Third, I proposed that in light of the foregoing, we might still regard Parfit's redescription and its suggested effects on our concern as rationally permissible. However, questions then arise about whether this rational permissibility delivers upon the promise that the redescription provides consolation and liberation.

Along the way, one recurring question was what exactly sets Parfit's picture apart from others. I argued that the availability of redescriptions of reality is not unique to his theory. His competitors are entitled to quite similar descriptions than the ones he deems liberating.

Despite these challenges, Parfit's arguments on personal identity have given us new prompts for reconsidering our attitudes towards death. Besides opening up these ways of thinking, he has succeeded in making plausible his own description of what was to come. While the chains of direct R-relations have come to an end not too long ago, many present experiences are related to his in less direct ways. There are memories of his life, countless thoughts influenced by his, and things done as a result of his advice.

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