

# The Survival of Persons: A Reply to Parfit's Psychological Reductionism

*Andrew Ward*

*University of York*

## *Abstract*

The psychological reductionist claims that what is important to our survival just consists in a series of causally related experiences. Our belief in a separately existing subject of experiences is held to be unjustified. In reply, it is contended that we need to distinguish between persons (continuing subjects of experience) and any related series of experiences (their lives). A number of objections to this conception of a person are considered and rejected.

*Keywords:* Personal identity, Psychological reductionism, Scepticism.

## 1. Opposing Psychological Reductionism

According to a contemporary theory of personal identity known as 'psychological reductionism',<sup>1</sup> the belief that we are each a separately existing self or subject of experiences, something that exists over and above any bodily continuity and/or series of experiences, is held to be unjustified, and we are recommended to reduce the conception of our identity over time by jettisoning this belief.

Suppose that by a reliable process called 'teletransportation', an exact printed record is first taken of your body's composition, immediately prior to its total destruction, and this record is then electronically beamed to Mars, where a replica body is created from completely new material. On the psychological reductionist's account, you survive in this replica body. Or, rather, his position is that the justified content to the belief in our continued existence is preserved in teletransportation. For, according to the psychological reductionist, personal identity, *insofar as it is defensible*, is constituted by a (non-branching) series of related mental events, such as those involved in acts of memory and in the occurrence of intentions, thoughts, and emotions. The conviction, which the reductionist acknowl-

<sup>1</sup>A theory developed by Derek Parfit: see Parfit 1971, 1984, 1995 and 2012. For an importantly similar account, see Shoemaker 1984.

edges that we are naturally inclined to hold, that our continued existence essentially resides in the persistence of a self or subject of experiences, understood as a continuant that is separable from, and so not reducible to, a succession of related experiences and/or bodily continuities, is dismissed as unwarranted in fact. We are neither justified in our belief in such a subject nor right to think that the satisfaction of this belief is crucial for survival. As the psychological reductionist sees it, what is crucial for survival is the continuation of that succession of related experiences which makes up our mental life.

The belief that our survival resides in the persistence of a separately existing self or subject of experiences is rejected by the reductionist on the grounds that, while we have no evidence in its favour, we have much evidence against it. In particular, there is now good evidence that every experience is proximately dependent on a proper functioning physical entity, the brain, and no evidence that our identity over time requires the persistence of anything non-physical. From which he concludes that although we—including the reductionist himself—are naturally inclined to accept that our continued existence does essentially reside in the persistence of a separately existing subject of experiences (shown, for instance, by our reaction to certain puzzle cases), it cannot reasonably be affirmed that our survival is dependent upon a Cartesian-style immaterial substance.

The psychological reductionist also regards the continued existence of numerically the same body (or mere brain) as unnecessary for our survival. He thinks that when we consider what really matters to us in our concern to survive, we realize that it is the continuation of that succession of related experiences which constitutes our mental life. Admittedly, if this mental life is to be capable of full expression, it will require not only a qualitatively identical—or, at least, a functionally equivalent—brain but a gross human body, and a body that is sufficiently similar to our present one. But provided these physical conditions are met and they are appropriately causally related to the present physical continuities, we shall have everything that is really important for survival.

The force of the contention that bodily continuity is not necessary for our life to be preserved can best be appreciated by conceiving a situation where there is a succession of mental events that are linked together by the relations necessary for the continuity of memories, intentions, emotions, and other psychological features—where there is, in other words, *psychological continuity*—without physical continuity. Teletransportation precisely fits this bill, since it is a duplicating process which wholly destroys bodily continuity without destroying psychological continuity. For my part, I think that this thought experiment does convincingly show that the result of the teletransportation process is the continuation, or as good as the continuation, on Mars of the life that had earlier began on Earth.<sup>2</sup> Hence, bodily continuity cannot be what really matters for the preservation of our life. And since psychological continuity is not destroyed in the process, the psychological reductionist further contends that it is this latter continuity, psychological continuity, which is of decisive importance for our survival.

Rather than claiming that the psychological reductionist has gone too far in rejecting the requirement of bodily, or mere brain, continuity, I maintain that he ought also to reject psychological continuity as important for our survival. Once

<sup>2</sup> In this section I am, for ease of exposition, only considering cases where teletransportation produces a *single* or *non-branching* series of related experiences. Examples of the multiple instantiation of such series will be taken up in the next section.

it is admitted that a thought experiment involving teletransportation can play a legitimate role in determining what the belief in our continued existence can reasonably be held to consist in (by showing that bodily continuity is not required), it ought to be admitted that another thought experiment, which makes use of a closely analogous duplication process, can also be employed in this endeavour. The latter thought experiment, I shall argue, shows that our identity should be distinguished, not only from bodily continuity but, equally, from any given series of mental events and, hence, from psychological continuity. Far from personal identity, or what is important about personal identity, just consisting in a non-branching series of related mental events, the psychological reductionist ought to acknowledge that the true view of personal identity requires us to *distinguish* between the identity of persons and the identity of their lives.

Why do I think that the conceivability of a duplication process, in essence the same as teletransportation, ought to convince the psychological reductionist that the true view of personal identity requires a distinction between persons and their lives? My grounds stem from this. In addition to the belief that, according to the psychological reductionist, we all, or nearly all, naturally have, viz. that we are separately existing subjects of experience, there is, I suggest, a strong tendency to believe that we each start out in life with a specific (and usually unique) fundamental nature in respect of cognitive, conative, and affective capacities. How that life develops depends, we hold, on the interaction between two factors: on the one hand, the given person's fundamental nature and, on the other, the sense experiences which the person has during that life (together with the circumstances in which they occur). As far as I am aware, those who have explicitly defended the conception of the self as some kind of separately existing subject have invariably affirmed that it is the seat of our most basic capacities and dispositions, those that we bring to our sense experiences. But, whether this is so or not, the idea that we each possess such a fundamental nature seems to me at least as widely held as the belief that we are separately existing subjects of experience.

Now suppose that by a reliable process resembling teletransportation—let us call it 'telereproduction'—there is started up, following the ending of a person's life on Earth, a new life on Mars by means of the same set of instructions as originally made possible the life of the person on Earth. So although a complete body, including brain, scan is taken at the start of a person's life and an electronic record retained, bodily death takes place at some time in the person's adult life. Consequently, with telereproduction, when the adult body of the person living on Earth has ceased irreparably to function, the duplicating machine is employed to send the electronic record of his or her complete body at two years after birth to another machine on Mars, which constructs a replica body of that person, as it existed at that formative time.<sup>3</sup> Here, it seems to me, we can legitimately say that, following the ending of the life of a given person (on Earth), telereproduction has begun

<sup>3</sup> For the following reason, I have taken two years after birth as the point by which the fundamental nature has been laid down. On current evidence, the brain, by about the age of two, has made the maximum number of its synaptic connections (from then on experience pairs down some of these connections and reinforces the remainder). Having said that, it appears that some additional neurons and synaptic connections are naturally formed during puberty and adolescence: connections that map onto changes in an individual's attitude to risk and the controlling of impulses (see e.g. Eagleman 2015 and Heather-ton 2011). If so, the correct point for identifying some of the dispositions, constituting a given person's fundamental character, will need to be placed at this later period.

another life of that same person (on Mars). Hence, like teletransportation, telereproduction duplicates a body; but it duplicates the body as it was at the beginning of a person's life. When it does so, the process can be seen as giving us an example of the same person living different—and, hence, multiple—lives. In the case in hand, one person can be seen as having two lives: there would first be a life on Earth and, then, a life on Mars.

The upshot is that since the psychological reductionist acknowledges that he is himself naturally inclined to believe that a person's identity essentially resides in a separately existing subject of experiences, he should distinguish our continued existence as persons, not only from physical but psychological continuity. In supposing that personal identity, or what is important about personal identity, just consists in a non-branching series of related mental events, he has confused the criterion for the continued existence of a given *life* with the criterion for the continued existence of a given *person*. (Even the possibility that a series of mental events can be related into a single life is, on the view I am defending, a *consequence* of these events themselves being the expression of the person's fundamental nature.)

By employing the teletransportation thought experiment in his endeavour to convince us that personal identity does not require bodily continuity, the psychological reductionist obscures the fact that this identity is not reducible to psychological continuity. He obscures the fact because, with teletransportation, duplication occurs *during* the life of a person. But given the psychological reductionist accepts that, in seeking to determine what the content of our belief in personal identity should reasonably consist in, it is legitimate to imagine the operation of a reliable duplication process during a person's life, he should also accept that it is legitimate to engage in such a thought experiment at the *start* of a person's life, as with telereproduction. When this is done, the distinction between personal identity and any particular series of experiences (as well as any particular set of physical continuities) is no longer obscured. For the telereproduction thought experiment shows that there is a key distinction between persons and their lives: a distinction that is analogous to the one which we already acknowledge between musical works and their performances. And, having once recognized the distinction between persons and their lives, it would be a mistake to regard a person's identity as in some way reducible to a given series of experiences and/or continuities of a token body (or mere brain). It would be a mistake because the survival of a person cannot then be said to be identical with, or just to consist in, those phenomena that go to constitute a particular life, any more than the survival of a piece of music can be said to be identical with, or just to consist in, those phenomena that go to constitute a particular performance. A person, rather, can survive the termination of a life as a piece of music can survive the ending of a performance. The survival of a piece of music depends upon the existence of a record of the music's structure which is appropriately causally related to that work's creation (so making possible, in conjunction with a set of players, a performance of that particular work). Similarly, the survival of a person depends upon the existence of a record of the fundamental nature which is appropriately causally related to that person's creation (so making possible, in conjunction with a set of sense experiences, a life of that particular person).

What a Reductionist denies is that the subject of experiences is a *separately existing entity*, distinct from a brain and body, and a series of physical and mental events (Parfit 1984: 223, italics original).

This is the central reductionist claim. My argument has been that a thought experiment, parallel to the one that the psychological reductionist himself employs in seeking to convince us that the true view of personal identity should not be tied to a given brain or body, ought, in consistency, to convince him that his central reductionist claim is almost entirely the reverse of the truth.

## 2. Duplication

Given the distinction that has been made between persons (or selves) and their lives, we may now briefly consider cases where the same person has two or more lives running concurrently. The psychological reductionist maintains that examples which involve what is frequently referred to as the 'division' of a person provide additional grounds for rejecting the belief that a person should be regarded as essentially a separate existent from a series of experiences and/or bodily continuities. He holds that unless we go over to a reductionist conception of a person, these examples of 'division' must involve us in absurdities or contradictions. The question is whether these, or analogous, absurdities must be generated once our distinction between persons and their lives is admitted. If not, we will have been provided with no countervailing reason for revising the conclusion that we should reject the reductionist's central theoretical claim.

It may be thought that if two (or more) concurrent lives of the same person are admitted, it is quite obvious that we are going to find ourselves involved in parallel absurdities to those that the psychological reductionist has so spectacularly uncovered with his own examples of a person 'dividing'. For instance, shall we not immediately be landed in the contradiction of having to say that the same person is living in two places at the same time? If it is contradictory to say that the same person can be in two places at the same time—which, on our present concept of a person, it is—then, surely, it is equally absurd to say that one and the same person is living at two places at the same time. But there is no genuine absurdity here because, given our distinction between persons and their lives, this will only be a way of saying that two lives of the same person are occurring at different places at the same time. (As we sometimes say that the same piece of music can be heard at two places at the same time, when what is more circuitously meant is that two performances of the same piece can be heard at different places at the same time.)

Even the notorious brain splitting example—more strictly, cerebrum splitting example—need not produce a contradiction. Let us grant as conceivable that, by separating a given person's two cerebral hemispheres and placing each half in a different functioning but cerebrum-less human body, there could be two synchronic lives, both of which can be traced back to a single set of experiences of that given person (sustained by the two cerebral hemispheres combined). We are not thereby forced into the contradictory situation of having to admit that two different lives of the person are the same life. Here, too, a musical analogy can help to explain why.

Consider certain performances of a given choral work. These begin with two singers to each part; later, and uncharacteristically for performances of this work, the singers of each part spatially separate, e.g. by the singers, at a suitable interval in the music, filing apart in two columns, with both sets of singers finishing their performance in different locations. Under these circumstances, there seem to be two conceivable ways of interpreting what has happened. On the one hand, it

might be said that, as the work has here been realized, what began as a single partial performance (jointly sustained by two singers per part) ended with two partial performances (each sustained by one singer per part). On this way of putting matters, we could say of two auditors, each of whom then listened to a full performance of the work, that while they both listened to the same partial performance sustained by two singers per part, it would not follow that they both listened to the same *full* performance, i.e. if they did not both listen to the same partial performance sustained by one singer per part. On the other hand, it might be said that although such an interpretation is not self-contradictory, it is unreasonable to hold that there was, even at the outset of the singing, a partial single performance of the work. Rather, it will be said that, given the sequel, it would be preferable to admit that there were really two concurrent performances of the same work all along; it was simply that this was not obvious until the separation of the two rows of singers. (So, on this latter interpretation, my original description of what happened was mistaken: at no time were two singers jointly sustaining each part.)

Analogously, with a case in which separation of a given person's two cerebral hemispheres leads to two synchronic lives, each of which is traceable back to a single set of experiences jointly sustained by the two hemispheres. On the one hand, it might be said that, as the person has here been realized, what began as a single partial life (jointly sustained by the two cerebral hemispheres) ended with two partial lives (each sustained by a single hemisphere). On this way of putting matters, we could say of two onlookers, each of whom then witnessed a full life of the person, that while they both witnessed the same partial life sustained by the two cerebral hemispheres, it would not follow that they both witnessed the same *full* life, i.e. if they did not both witness the same partial life sustained by one cerebral hemisphere. On the other hand, it might be said that although such an interpretation is not self-contradictory, it is unreasonable to hold that there was, even at the outset of the experiences, a single partial life. Rather, it will be said that, given the sequel, it would be preferable to admit that there were really two concurrent lives of the same person all along; it was simply that this was not obvious until the separation of the two cerebral hemispheres. (So, on this latter interpretation, my original description of what happened was mistaken: at no time were the two cerebral hemispheres jointly sustaining a single set of experiences.)

Whatever the relative merits of these alternative descriptions, neither appears to me to be absurd or self-contradictory. The cerebrum splitting example, then, does not expose a logical incoherence in our distinction between persons and their lives.

Equally, no incoherence need be generated in the case where teletransportation leads to several concurrent lives of the same person. Say that teletransporting a given person, as that person appears in a life on Earth, were to result in two concurrent lives, one on Mars and the other on Venus. We could deal with such cases along the lines of the first of the two possible ways that I suggested for the cerebrum splitting example. That is, we could take it that what began as a single partial life of a person (on Earth) has ended in two partial lives of the same person (one on Mars and the other on Venus). Consequently, it would not follow that because a pair of onlookers each witnessed a full life of the given person, incorporating the partial life on Earth, they both witnessed the *same* full life. It would not follow because they may have witnessed different partial lives of the given person after teletransportation. And if they did, one of the onlookers would have witnessed the full life which ended on Mars and the other would have witnessed the

full life which ended on Venus. Nonetheless, both full lives would have been those of one and the same person.

### 3. Criticism and Defence

None of the grounds so far considered has succeeded in justifying the psychological reductionist's denial that we are separately existing subjects of experience.

I now turn to a criticism of my argument: 'By distinguishing, in the way you have, selves or subjects from their lives, you must be suggesting that we are *abstract entities*. We could not possibly think of ourselves in this way' (cf. Parfit 1984: 297). The idea is that, on my account, it must follow that the self can neither think nor decide nor act. For, if the self is identified with a continuant that is capable of multiple lives, analogous to the way in which a piece of music is capable of multiple performances, it must follow that this self cannot *do* anything (any more than a piece of music can *make* sounds). This consequence, the criticism alleges, reduces your theory to absurdity.

But the theory only appears absurd when a distinction is overlooked: the distinction between, on the one hand, the self as a continuant with a specific fundamental nature and, thereby, with the *potentiality* for having experiences, and, on the other, any actual realization of this self in a given life (as a particular human animal). It is the self, as it is realized in any given life, which thinks, and decides, and acts. But it would be misleading to say that the self or person is 'the conscious controlling part of an animal' (see Parfit 2012: 20). For that would be to identify ourselves, not with a continuant which is capable of multiple lives and of existing independently of any animal, but with our realization in *one* life.<sup>4</sup> Whereas, on the view of the self that I am defending, our existence needs to be distinguished from any life we may lead, because although we do indeed *live and move* in virtue of our realization in any given life, our *being* consists in the continued existence of our fundamental nature. This is not, I suggest, an absurd position, since it allows that the self, as it is realized in any life, does think, decide, and act whilst affirming that the self, as it exists in itself, *transcends* the contingencies of any given life.

Accordingly, in identifying a person's being with a given fundamental nature, I am not contending that the fundamental nature should itself be equated with certain physical structures in a token human animal's brain (or with the token fundamental dispositions that its brain encodes). For, if that were so, there would have to be at least as many similar, but numerically distinct, fundamental natures as there are human animals which have resulted from a single human by means of telereproduction. On the contrary, I am contending that one and the same fundamental nature can be physically encoded, whether synchronically or diachronically, in many distinct human brains; thereby giving rise, together with sense experiences, to different lives of that same person. In short, in identifying a person's being with a given fundamental nature, that fundamental nature is conceived as a type, not a token. Analogously, a given musical work should not itself

<sup>4</sup> In abnormal circumstances, this one life may be continued in another (artificially constructed) human being, as with teletransportation, or by means of a cerebral transplant from the original human animal to the cerebrum-less brain of another human animal. But, according to the psychological reductionist, in no case are we dealing with the self as a separately existing entity.

be equated with the token physical score which makes possible a specific performance of that work. On the contrary, one and the same musical work can be physically encoded, synchronically or diachronically, in many distinct token scores; thereby giving rise, together with the action of players, to different performances of that same work.

Still, it may be replied, your entire position is premised on the belief that we each begin our lives with a *different* fundamental nature. Perhaps we do not; perhaps the differences between us, in respect of our fundamental cognitive, conative, and affective dispositions, are not, in general, significant. Instead, it is our sense experiences and the circumstances in which they occur, not our fundamental nature, which account for all, or virtually all, of the main distinguishing features in the lives of different subjects. In the present state of our knowledge, I accept that this alternative position must be admitted as possible, even though it is not, in my view, a very plausible one. But I do not accept that, even if it should, in fact, turn out to be correct, it would vitiate the point of my response to psychological reductionism. I have been urging that we conceive of ourselves as each possessing a distinct mix of abilities and dispositions which we bring to our lives and which serves, throughout, to shape how we engage with life's experiences. In a given life, our fundamental nature interacts with our sense experiences and circumstances (thereby giving rise to our varying objectives during that life); and its realization may be seriously impaired in old age or by accident or disease.

However, if further empirical evidence were to show that we do not each typically come to sense experience with a different fundamental nature then, indeed, my claim that we should distinguish between ourselves and our lives ought to be rejected. We would be left with the psychological reductionist's series of mental events as all that individuates us. But is this sufficient to count as the true view of personal identity? Or would we then have thrown out so much of what we hold to be definitive of ourselves that we should, rather, conceive of psychological reductionism, not as giving us the justified kernel of the concept of our identity, but as expressing *scepticism* about that concept's application? It is difficult to see how our concept of the self's identity can be thought to have even a pared down application, if no series of related mental events can be seen as resulting from some *specific* nature that significantly helps to shape what is valuable throughout that life. If there is nothing importantly distinct from that series of mental events, so that we can think that, under different circumstances, the subject of those events could live another life which is recognizably an expression of that *particular* subject (and not merely the expression of practically *any* human subject who has been similarly circumstanced) then what lies at the heart of our belief in the self would not apply to us. *I*—understood as a continuing subject of experiences that is distinguishable from others in respect of my fundamental nature—would not, in reality, exist, and so could not be contributing anything original to any life that is thought of as mine. And, plainly, a parallel point goes for everyone else, including those who make the deepest impression upon us. These consequences seem to me to strip away everything that we think of as constitutive of our identity. What remains would be a series of mental events that is dependent for its difference from any other series on the mere variations of sense experience and circumstance: there would be nothing *unique and continuing* from which the lives of each of us can be seen as unfolding in concert with that sense experience. Accordingly, even if the facts were to go against our being, in the way I have defended, separately existing subjects of experience, this notion is, I submit, the

keystone of the belief we have in ourselves. If it does not in fact obtain, we will not be left with a reduced content to the belief in our identity but with no defensible belief in that identity at all.

#### 4. Changes in Our Attitudes, Objectives, and Behaviour

In this concluding section, I argue that the psychological reductionist has failed to provide convincing grounds for declaring that the changes, which can be observed in our attitudes, objectives, and behaviour during our lives, show that we cannot reasonably conceive of ourselves as possessing, throughout, a stable, or virtually stable, fundamental nature.

At the same time, I acknowledge that some of the dispositions, making up a subject's fundamental nature, are not normally entirely unchanging throughout any given life. This alteration seems to me especially noteworthy in the case of *affective* dispositions. Hume's observation on one of these dispositions strikes me as persuasive:

A young man, whose passions are warm, will be more sensibly touched with amorous and tender images, than a man more advanced in years, who takes pleasure in wise, philosophical reflections concerning the conduct of life and moderation of the passions. At twenty, Ovid may be the favourite author; Horace at forty; and perhaps Tacitus at fifty (Hume 1757: 244).<sup>5</sup>

In short, I accept that, with respect to some affective dispositions at least, a subject's fundamental nature does have a natural tendency to vary in strength, and most conspicuously to moderate, with age.

But while I accept that there frequently is a predictable alteration in the *strength* of some fundamental dispositions, especially affective ones, this is compatible with the specific mix of dispositions that goes to make up a person's fundamental nature remaining stable, or virtually so, throughout life. From this perspective, it would be a gross exaggeration to claim that the observable changes of strength should be taken as demonstrating some kind of *successive self*: one whose dispositions are not strongly connected with those of the self that existed previously (see Parfit 1971: 24-25 and 1984: 302-306). A predictable change in the strengths of some of our fundamental dispositions during a lifetime does not amount to the emergence of a *different* self, any more than the predictable changes in a human being's facial appearance from adolescence to old age—ones that are not dependent on external accident or manipulation—amount to the emergence of a *different* facial physiognomy. In both cases, the similarities are normally sufficiently remarkable, as well as sufficiently predictable, for us to hold that what we are confronted with is, in essence, the same—the same self, the same facial physiognomy—throughout.

Even in those cases where, with no brain damage, we dramatically speak of one self being 'replaced' by another, this is not enough to prove that some of our fundamental dispositions have literally ceased to exist and been replaced by new ones, as opposed to the (re)emerging of certain members of our fundamental set, often together with the slackening in strength of others. When, in Proust's *A la*

<sup>5</sup> Hume was 46 when this essay was first published.

*recherche du temps perdu*, Marcel expresses the thought that the self that loved Albertine is ceasing to exist and being replaced by a different self to whom this attachment is alien (see Parfit 1984: 305; see also 1971: 25), he shows his awareness that a given exercise of one of his fundamental dispositions is slackening, that his searing affection for a particular human being is falling away, and that other features of his fundamental nature are increasingly able, under the circumstances, to (re)assert themselves. It was a notable aspect both of Marcel (the narrator) and of Proust (the novelist) that they had a *periodic* tendency to fall deeply but painfully in love with a series of human beings (during which times the operation of *other* features of their psyche was seriously impaired). Far from this kind of see-saw life giving evidence of a succession of *different* selves—a succession of newly emerging sets of dispositions—such a life testifies to the continuation of a *single* fundamental nature, but one in which certain features recurrently assert themselves at the expense of others. It was *characteristic* both of Marcel and of Proust that their lives unfolded in this emotionally up-and-down way.

Again, when a young man expresses radical idealist views which, in later life, he repudiates, I find it very implausible to regard ‘the understandable and natural’ way of describing such a case as that of our being confronted with *successive* selves<sup>6</sup> (in a sense which disproves the continuing existence of a fundamental nature). Predictably there will be a lessening in the ardour with which the man holds his political views, i.e. the strength of affective dispositions will moderate with age. And this moderation, combined with the man’s increased experience of human nature and, perhaps, his own altered circumstances, can account for his changed political position without denying that there has been, throughout this time, one fundamental nature which that life expresses.

In sum, on the evidence provided, the changes, through a full lifetime, in the objects of our affective, conative, and cognitive dispositions should not be taken as sufficient to prove, even in the type of dramatic cases illustrated above (let alone in the more everyday cases), that such a life is expressive of a series of successive selves, a series in which one set of dispositions is largely, albeit gradually, succeeded by a different set. On the contrary, given the evidence offered by the psychological reductionist, the interplay between our original mix of dispositions—together with varying sense experiences, circumstances, and age—seem to me sufficient adequately to accommodate the changes that occur in outlook and behaviour during a lifetime (leaving aside brain damage) without requiring us to call into question the continued existence of a distinct fundamental nature.

In this respect, certain features of a person’s fundamental nature can play a particularly critical role in determining the degree to which changes in outlook and behaviour are manifested. Those whose willpower is strong and enduring are often able, by continual application, to turn their minds from pursuing certain ends which would otherwise attract them. It may even be possible, for those of an especially resolute temper, to overcome altogether a basic dispositional tendency, thereby allowing other original ones to flourish. But this does not negate the key role of a person’s fundamental nature, since it is precisely a conative feature of that nature—a powerful and steadfast will—which makes possible the weakening or even the overcoming of some other original characteristics.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Parfit 1984: 326-29.

<sup>7</sup> Hence, even with no natural slackening in an affective disposition, a person may justifiably be handed down a reduced sentence for a crime that had been earlier committed in

While, therefore, the objects engaging our attention do plainly vary over a lifetime, this is not enough to show that each of us lacks a durable individuality: a fundamental and continuing nature which *forms* or *structures* how we confront life's adventures. It is this nature which, I am claiming, constitutes the core of what we believe makes each of us who we are. While the pleasures and pains, successes and failures, of our lives are, clearly, partly dependent on our sense experiences—without these we would not have a life at all—what identifies each of us is how we approach and react to these experiences. It is the way we deal with our experiences, within the circumstances of their occurrence, which expresses our fundamental nature: a nature, we believe, which is separable from any given series of related mental events and which remains recognizably the same throughout our lives.

I conclude that it would be seriously premature to throw out our central belief in a separately existing subject of experiences. To do so, on the evidence adduced, would be unjustifiably to deny that each of us is something over and above any particular body and/or series of related mental events. The denial of the self as a further fact which continues to exist throughout our lives, and which is responsible, in large measure, for their direction, has been taken by the psychological reductionist to have striking moral consequences (see especially Parfit 1984: Chaps 14 and 15). Since, it is claimed, there is no such self, we should give less importance, and, in some cases, almost no importance at all, to the *separateness of persons* and, thereby, to principles of equality or distribution *between* the lives of different people. Similarly, it is claimed, we should give less weight, and, in some cases, scarcely any weight at all, to the idea of future *compensation* for earlier pains or pleasures even *within* a life of any given person. Such radical changes in our moral beliefs should not be undertaken without well-grounded conceptual and/or empirical arguments supporting the denial of the self as a further fact. These, I have contended, have not been produced.

But, I must emphasize, I have not gone so far as to affirm that the notion of a separately existing self, with a stable fundamental nature, does actually apply to us. Whether, and to what extent, it may do so is an empirical question for which further evidence is needed. Instead, I have contended, first, that the psychological reductionist has failed to demonstrate that our belief in such a self is unjustified and, second, that should future empirical evidence establish the falsity of our belief, the correct response is to embrace scepticism about personal identity. The idea that psychological reductionism represents a reduced, yet defensible, concept of our identity or survival is not, in my estimation, sustainable. It is a pivotal part of our belief in the self that it significantly determines, in virtue of its fundamental nature, how, throughout life, we respond to its challenges. If this belief is shown to be wholly unjustified, so too will be our belief in personal identity and survival.<sup>8</sup>

that life. Where there is good evidence of genuine repentance, as shown e.g. by the offender having now mastered the anti-social tendency that originally led to the crime, it may reasonably be held that a lesser punishment is deserved. Mitigation in sentence, in cases where there is a notable time lapse between the crime and the court's guilty verdict, does not require the supposition that we are here dealing with what the psychological reductionist calls 'a successive self'. The very ideas of repentance and desert indicate that, at a fundamental level, we take it that we are dealing with the *same* self or subject.

<sup>8</sup> I am very grateful to the anonymous referee(s) for showing me the need to clarify and amend my exposition in the final two sections.

## References

- Eagleman, D. 2015, *The Brain*, Edinburgh: Canongate.
- Heatherton, T.F. 2011, "Neuroscience of Self and Self-regulation", *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62, 363-90.
- Hume, D. 1757, "Of the Standard of Taste", republished in Miller, E.F. (ed.), *David Hume: Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1987, 226-49.
- Parfit, D. 1971, "Personal Identity", *Philosophical Review*, 80, 1, 3-27.
- Parfit, D. 1984, *Reasons and Persons*, Part III, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parfit, D. 1995, "The Unimportance of Identity", in Harris, H. (ed.), *Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 13-46.
- Parfit, D. 2012, "We Are Not Human Beings", *Philosophy*, 87, 1, 5-28.
- Proust, M. 1949, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Shoemaker, S. 1984, "Personal Identity: A Materialist's Account", in Shoemaker, S. and Swinburne, R. (eds.), *Personal Identity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 67-132.