

# Persons, Reasons, and What Matters: The Philosophy of Derek Parfit

*Fabio Patrone*

*University of Genoa*

*“The conflicts that Parfit has discovered are entirely real,  
and his imaginative and powerful arguments have uncovered  
deep questions which have in most cases  
never been explored so thoroughly, while,  
in other cases, they have barely been thought about at all”.*

(Williams 1984: 10)

## 1. The Importance of Being Derek

Derek Parfit played a crucial role in the XX century philosophical debate. His masterpiece, *Reasons and Persons*, has been highly influential both in moral philosophy, and personal identity. It is hard to overlook the fact that Parfit's ideas gave the main contribution to the contemporary philosophy of persons. He reformulates a debate stuck in the classical contraposition between psychological and physical criteria of personal identity, by introducing his most famous idea: identity doesn't matter in survival. This thesis, and its moral implications, has been a challenge for everyone tackling the issues related to persons and normative moral philosophy.

## 2. From the Original Debate to the “Identity Doesn't Matter View”

The identity of persons has been pivotal in the philosophical discussion since John Locke's “Of identity and diversity” (Locke 1975: Book 2, Ch 27). In this famous part of the *Essay*, Locke analyzes personal identity via different thought experiments (“the prince and the cobbler”, “waking and sleeping Socrates”, ...), starting a new era for the debate over personal identity, which from Locke on, has been divided between the supporters of the so-called “psychological criterion”, and the ones believing in the “physical criterion”. The former generally state that a person *A* at a certain time  $t_1$  is identical to a person *B* at a following time  $t_2$  if and only if *A* and *B* share some sort of psychological traits (consciousness, memory, ...). The latter generally maintain that a person *A* at a certain time  $t_1$  is identical to a person *B* at a following time  $t_2$  if and only if *A* and *B* have the same body (or at least a

consistent part of it).<sup>1</sup> The debate followed this dichotomy until Parfit introduced what, *prima facie*, seems to be an implausible idea: it is not important whether I am identical or not to my future self. As he explains in Parfit 1971, and more accurately in Parfit 1984, what matters for my survival is a certain psychological relation with a future self, even if it does not coincide with quantitative identity. In other words: it's not important if *I*, the person writing this paper, will survive. Even if I will be replaced by an exact replica, with the same emotions, memories, and psychological traits such as *I*, and *I* will die, the existence of my replica counts as survival. Again, this may sound a far-fetched answer to a rather deep philosophical question. But it is not. Parfit's theory is indeed both attractive and uncomfortable: it is very elegant in its form but its conclusions feel counterintuitive and hard to accept. He suggests a *liberation from the self* by adopting what he calls a "reductionist view": our existence is not a "deep further fact, distinct from physical and psychological continuity" (Parfit 1984: 281). Since identity doesn't matter in survival, the difference between my life and the life of other persons is not as wide as we believe. The world of humans is better defined as a sort of Humean whole of relations between experiences, rather than a mere contraposition between different beings.

Following Locke's fascination for thought experiments, Parfit proposes a vast number of imaginary situations to question the importance of the classical accounts of personal identity. He introduces and discusses thought experiments that will be cited hundreds of times, such as teletransportation, fission and fusion, gradual replacement of brain parts, gradual alteration of psychological traits, and so on. It is impossible to deal with personal identity without answering to Parfit's perplexities about classical criteria or disregarding the power of his arguments against what he calls "anti-reductionism". In light of this kind of "Copernican revolution", it's not surprising that in the last decades there has been no further changes of perspective in the debate. I am not suggesting that Parfit cleared all the issues related to personal identity, but he surely changed it in a substantial and unexpected way.

#### References

- Locke J. 1975, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Nidditch, P. (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press (original work, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., first published 1694).
- Parfit D. 1971, "Personal Identity", *The Philosophical Review*, 80, 1, 3-27.
- Parfit D. 1984, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Olson E. 2007, *What Are We? A Study in Personal Ontology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams B. 1984, "Review of 'Reasons and Persons'", *London Review of Books*, 6, 10.

<sup>1</sup> For a thorough analysis of the debate, see Olson 2007.