Derek Parfit: “Personal Identity”

“Personal Identity” targets two beliefs commonly thought to be central to most earlier discussions of personal identity. The first is the belief that all questions about personal identity must have an answer. At some future time, it is either the case that I shall exist or I shall not exist. Questions about personal identity are all-or-nothing questions. The second belief is that there are matters which are important to us, having to do with survival, memory, and responsibility, which cannot be decided unless the question of personal identity is answered. In order to determine whether or not I survive or am responsible for some future action, I must be able to answer the question, “am I the same person?” Parfit argues in this essay that these beliefs are mistaken. He employs a series of ingenious thought experiments, particularly cases of fission and fusion, the object of which is to establish that survival is neither one-one nor all-or-nothing, and that therefore survival is not necessarily connected to identity. If Parfit is right, then key assumptions in our common sense account of personal identity would be wrong and we would need an alternative way of thinking about personhood.

To establish that what matters is not identity, Parfit relies on Wiggins’ case of fission. Parfit asks the reader to imagine a situation where a man’s brain is split into two and both halves are separately transplanted into two waiting, brainless bodies. On the assumption that “both resulting people have my character and apparent memories” (5), Parfit wonders whether the man survives. It would be wrong to assume that brain-division is tantamount to death, as a man can survive with half a brain. Furthermore, it would be arbitrary to conclude that the man survived as one or the other of the transplant
recipients. Parfit argues that the only reasonable conclusion to this operation is that the man survives as two different people. The two resulting people are his later selves. They share a past self without being the same self as each other (22).

Parfit draws a number of conclusions from this analysis of Wiggins’ case. First, Wiggins’ case undermines the two beliefs which are his target in this essay. The belief that there must be an answer to the question of personal identity is found to be implausible when asked in response to the divided brain. “If all the possible answers are implausible, it is hard to decide which of them is true, and hard even to keep the belief that one of them must be true” (8). Regarding the second belief, that personal identity is important to survival, Parfit argues that Wiggins’ case demonstrates that you can have everything necessary for survival and yet not have identity. The relation of the original person to each of the resulting people is not a relation of identity but it does contain “all that interest us—all that matters—in any ordinary case of survival” (10). Furthermore, Wiggins’ case suggests that what matters is not identity, as what matters is not one-one.

Having established that what matters in survival need not be one-one, Parfit uses cases of fusion to argue that survival is a matter of degree. Cases of fusion are clearly not cases of identity but they are, Parfit argues, cases of survival, at least to some degree. Some of who you are survives when you fuse with another person and this suggests that what matters in survival can have degrees. He cites two analogies in support of this claim. First, while fusion involves changing some of our desires and characteristics, “only the very self-satisfied would think of this as death. Many people would welcome treatments with these effects” (19). Secondly, fusing can be thought of as synonymous
with choosing a compatible marriage partner, something not typically thought to be tantamount to death.

With this case of fusion and the earlier case of fission, Parfit has established that what matters is neither all-or-nothing nor one-one. Identity is all-or-nothing and one-one. Therefore, what matters cannot be identity. Parfit suggests that what is important in survival is not identity but psychological continuity, the continuation of one’s memories and character, and connectedness, the holding of direct psychological relations (20). I am psychologically connected to both past and future selves which is a way of continuing to exist which does not imply identity through time (22).

Wiggins’ case forces a breach in the belief that identity is what matters. Parfit widens this breach and argues that most of what matters can be described in ways that do not presuppose identity. Rather than speaking of identity, for instance, we ought to speak in terms of past and later selves. Memory, too, can be redescribed in such a way so that it does not presuppose that I am identical to the person whose experiences I am remembering. Parfit’s notion of q-memories does not carry with it the assumption that I, the person remembering, am the very same person who had the experience remembered. Were we routinely able to have other people’s memories, as suggested, for instance, by films like Total Recall and Strange Days, then we would no longer be entitled to assume that memories imply identity. Parfit similarly argues that many of the relations that are a consequence of psychological continuity (intention, remember, recognize, witness, responsible) can be redescribed in ways which do not presuppose identity.

The implications of Parfit’s analysis of personal identity are far ranging. While our everyday intuitions seem to be premised upon the idea of a separately existing self or
Cartesian Ego, Parfit undermines such intuitions. In undermining the importance of identity and the significance of the Ego, Parfit identifies with Locke’s version of a psychological criterion and Hume’s argument against Butler and Reid that we do not experience ourselves as a persisting subject of experience. If neither self nor identity have any special significance, Parfit’s view perhaps liberates us from the self. My relationship to future selves becomes more fluid and open. There are no longer rigid boundaries between my present self and past and future selves. I may find it easier to identity with others across boundaries of weak psychological continuity. It seems clear that if Parfit is correct in his analysis of self and identity, our inherited metaphysical schemes collapse.

Works Cited