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Lecture 3

Psychological Continuity and Survival

1. Introduction

Today, we'll look at Parfit on the question of survival and personal identity. Parfit famously argued that personal identity is not "what matters".

2. Arguments from Survival

Many thought experiments in the debate about the persistence of persons attempt to test the limits of the **relation**

'X is the same person as Y'

They purport to do this by testing our intuitions about X's **survival**. Assumption:

Necessity: If X is the same person as Y then X survives as Y.

Some survival-based arguments also assume:

Sufficiency: If X survives as Y then X is the same person as Y.

Parfit challenging the sufficiency of survival for the persistence of persons.

3. Assumptions about the Question of Identity

Two further assumptions:

- 1. In all cases, the question about identity must have an answer.
- The answer to questions about identity are necessary for answering questions about survival, moral responsibility, memory and other related concepts.

Parfit against 1:

Suppose that a certain club exists for several years, holding regular meetings. The meetings then cease. Some years later, some of the members of this club form a club with the same name, and the same rules. We ask: 'Have these people reconvened the very same club? Or have they merely started up another club, which is exactly similar?' There might be an answer to this question. The original club might have had a rule explaining how, after such a period of non-existence, it could be reconvened. Or it might have had a rule preventing this. But suppose that there is no such rule, and no legal facts, supporting either answer to our question. And suppose that the people involved, if they asked our question, would not give it an answer. There would then be no answer to our question. The claim 'This is the same club' would be **neither true nor false**. (Parfit 1984: 213, original emphasis)

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4. Fission Cases

Imagine that your brain is severed, and each *hemisphere* is transplanted into a distinct body. Call the recipients Lefty and Righty (according to which hemisphere they've received). In this case, one of three things might happen:

(i) You do not survive fission.(ii) You survive as **one of** Lefty or Righty.(iii) You survive as both.

(i) requires we deny that identity is an intrinsic relation.

Intrinsicness: Whether X is (numerically) identical to Y depends solely on features internal to X and to Y. (e.g. Whether X is the same sandwich as Y only depends on whether X and Y are made of the same slices of bread, filled with the same filling, etc.)

(ii) suffers from arbitrariness.

(iii) leads to unacceptable results based on other beliefs we hold about the relation of identity.

First, we were interested in **numerical identity**. If (iii) claims that you are numerically identical to Lefty and Righty, then this will lead to contradiction.

P1. Lefty is not numerically identical to Righty. (By hypothesis)

- P2. Post-surgery, you are numerically identical to Lefty and to Righty. (By (iii))
- C1. Lefty is identical to Righty. (By the transitivity and symmetry of identity)

Denying **P1** still leads to contradiction. Suppose that, at some point post-surgery, Lefty feels thirsty but Righty does not:

- P3. Lefty and Righty are identical. (By hypothesis)
- P4. For all x and y, x is identical to y iff (for all p, p is a property of x iff p is a property of y). (Leibniz's Law)
- P5. Lefty is thirsty. (By hypothesis)
- P6. Righty is not thirsty. (By hypothesis)
- **C2**. Lefty and Righty are not identical. (By P4, P5, P6)

Accepting **P1**, but denying that personal identity is transitive seems to change the subject. It is effectively to accept:

(iii)* You bear an important, intransitive relation to Lefty and Righty.

Parfit's solution: Accept (iii)*.

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He argues that it is (iii)* and not the answer on identity that is more important. It is this distinct relation that matters.

The relation of the original person to each of the resulting people contains all that interests us—all that matters—in any ordinary case of survival. This is why we need a sense in which one person can survive as two. (1971: 10)

5. Psychological Continuity and What Matters

Parfit: "what matters for survival need not be one-one" (10, my emphasis)

Parfit proposes to give an account of what matters in terms of psychological continuity.

He defines the concept of **q-memory** and other related notions:

Q-remembering: Say that "I am q-remembering an experience if
(1) I have a belief about a past experience which seems in itself like a memory belief,
(2) someone did have such an experience, and
(3) my belief is dependent upon this experience in the same way (whatever that is) in which a memory of an experience is dependent upon it." (15)

If I q-remember something, the thing that I q-remember is a **q-memory**.

We can also define **q-intentions**, **q-beliefs**, **q-responsibility**. We can define all of the elements we thought were relevant to psychological continuity, but in ways that do not assume identity.

Psychological Connectedness: *X* is psychologically connected to *Y* to the extent that *X* and *Y* share q-states. So, for instance, to the extent that *Y* q-remembers *X*'s actions, *X* q-intends that *Y* perform certain actions, *Y* is q-responsible for *X*'s actions, etc.

Psychological connectedness is **intransitive**. It does not follow from X's q-remembering Y's actions, and Y's q-remembering Z's actions that X q-remembers Z's actions. But we can define a transitive relation on this one by taking its **ancestral**.

Psychological Continuity: *X* is psychologically continuous with *Y* just in case *X* and *Y* are related by a chain of psychological connectedness.

Personal Identity: *X* is the same person as *Y* iff *X* is psychologically continuous with *Y*, and for all *Z* such that *Z* is psychologically continuous with *X*, *Z* = *Y*.

Survival? What matters for survival is psychological connectedness.