

Identity Is Not What Matters

Relativism, Reason, and Reality
Spring 2005

Why it doesn't matter

- Identity we are told is relation R holding in non-branching form with its normal cause.
- Neither Lefty nor Righty is identical to you by that standard.
- But nothing intrinsically important is gained if Righty never comes into being, so that Lefty is you after all.
- Similarly nothing important is gained if Righty comes into being three minutes later, after "your" identity has a chance to take hold.

What does matter?

- Something that is preserved when you're succeeded by Lefty and Righty both.
- Options:
 - R with its normal cause
 - R with any reliable cause
 - R with any cause
 - R even uncaused
 - Not even R (the Extreme Claim, 307-12)
- Parfit flirts with "not even R" but seems to opt in the end for "R with any cause" (287).

"*R with any cause*" as what matters

- Parfit grants this leads to counterintuitive results in some cases, but thinks the intuitions dissipate when we fully assimilate the truth about what we are.
- Here are some awkward-looking cases with Parfit's actual or possible attempt at dissipation.

Teletransportation

- Teletransportation involves R with any cause, so it preserves what matters but not identity (which requires the normal cause)
- If he is right "transportation" is a misnomer. It's like making a photocopy with the original being destroyed
- Shouldn't copying-with-death be feared?
- No, he says: identity fails because the cause is abnormal. That "cannot matter"; "It is the effect which matters" (286).
- Analogy: You first think it a great loss to lose your eyes -- but not if you were given an alternative basis for vision

Not so fast

- Causes can matter too!
- Is s/he saying it out of love or to avoid hurting your feelings? Is s/he even there?
- Parfit in saying "only the effect matters" is inviting us to compare R to vision.
- But an invitation is not an argument.
- Why shouldn't we compare it to cases where the cause is crucial?

The branch-line case

- This is teletransportation that destroys you a short time after making your replica
- Your replica is on Mars; you will die in a few hours; isn't it rational to be worried -- anyway more worried than if it was the replica that was going to die?
- Not according to Parfit. He supports this with an analogy.

The sleeping pill

- It puts you to sleep in an hour; you wake up remembering the first half-hour but not the second.
- Here I am in the second half-hour.
- Don't I care egoistically about the person who wakes up?
- Yet his psychological connections are to my *former* self, not my present self -- just like in the branch line case.

Is the analogy good?

- Hold on: the person who wakes up is me!! Maybe that's why I care.
- But suppose he's right that the cases are analogous.
- That just shows we have to treat the two cases alike. There are two ways to do it.
- Maybe our view of the second case should be changed to agree with our view of the first!

Murder while asleep

- Mad Scientist scans your sleeping brain at 12am; she downloads your complete (quasi-)psychology into a waiting body.
- The process is finished at 3am; your replica lies with you in bed until 8am.
- You (still asleep) are given a lethal injection at 8am and incinerated.
- Your replica rises at 9am to enjoy a bowl of Froot Loops

Good analogy?

- This is a kind of branch-line case
- Parfit should say nothing has been lost.
- But to be incinerated unawares is horrible!
- He could argue that if you knew the whole set-up beforehand, you wouldn't greatly care.
- And isn't the better-informed judgment more to be trusted than the less-informed?

Duplication by coincidence

- A replica of you might occur by coincidence, as someone might unknowingly paint a Mona Lisa.
- S/he is R-related to you with no cause, so Parfit would say what matters is lost.
- But his own analogy suggests a different answer.
- He says it doesn't matter if a cause is unreliable; it's like an unreliable cure that works; all that matters is you wake up healthy.
- But of course all that matters is you recover, not that the treatment *caused* you to recover!
- To judge by his analogy, "no cause" is good enough -- so the coincidental replica preserves what matters!

Teletransportation by coincidence

- Just like the branch-line case, but you never step into the device
- You learn that you will shortly die -- however a person just like you has accidentally been fabricated on Mars.
- If what matters is R with no cause, there is nothing to fear; your fluky replica alive tomorrow is just as good as you alive.

Trivial differences

- Parfit thinks that trivial differences can't matter; that is why branch-line is no worse than regular teletransportation
- Is he right? Two questions:
 - Why should significance flow up from the details, rather than the details acquiring significance by their association with higher level results? (Music, poetry, ...)
 - If we do in fact prefer Y to trivially different X, how can that be irrational? Surely it is up to us what we care about?