

The truth will set you free

Reason, Relativism, and Reality

Spring 2005

Buying into reductionism

- Buddha did it: "A sentient being does exist, you think,..? You are misled by a false conception. This bundle of elements is void of Self...Just as a set of wooden parts receives the name of carriage, So do we give to elements, The name of fancied being" (502)
- If Buddha could, so can we

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Effect on attitudes

- That depends where you start from
- Say you were/are strongly convinced that identity *properly so-called* involves a further fact
- Then you will feel that if Reductionism is true, ordinary so-called "survival" is death
- There are *no* future people whose lives you look forward to in a first-personal way; the future is a matter of *complete indifference*
- You are like the theist who says that if God is dead, then everything is permitted

But we are not so doctrinaire

- Most of us do *not* think personal identity goes out the window in the absence of a further fact
- Compare the theist who reasons that if God isn't there, morality must have some other basis
- If *this* is our condition, then Parfit hopes to convince us we should care about our R-descendants the way we care about ourselves
- This is the Moderate Claim (311)

Rethinking "Equal Concern"

- Concern can be apportioned across time in more than one way.
- If identity is a further fact, *all parts of one's future should be of equal concern*
- If all we have is close R-descendants and distant ones, how should this be modified?

Favoritism OK?

- One option is to keep the requirement: we should care equally about all parts of our R-descendants' futures, even those thousands of years away
- Parfit rejects this, because he thinks connectedness matters over and above continuity
 - "since connectedness is ... weaker over longer periods, I can rationally care less about my further future"
- This applies even to R-descendants who are me!
- He concludes it can be rational to act against one's own long term self-interest to secure some more immediate reward. (Teenagers are right.)

Rethinking "Commitments"

- Are my R-descendants bound by commitments?
- A young Russian socialist swears he will give his land to peasants. He knows his ideals may fade; his wife must promise that "if I ever change my mind and ask you to revoke this document, you will not consent" (327).
- He considers his ideals essential; she must think of his corrupt middle-aged self as a different person
- What as a Reductionist should she do when the fateful day arrives?

Rethinking "Desert"

- Desert is getting what is coming to you, be it reward or punishment
- Should the corrupt middle-aged shopkeeper be punished for his bomb-throwing period as a youth?
- Should he be honored for helping to drive corrupt middle-aged shopkeepers of an earlier generation from power?
- A Reductionist might take a different view of this than (say) a Cartesian. How? Why?

Rethinking "Utilitarianism"

- Utilitarians say we should act so as to maximize the overall well-being of humankind.
- Does that mean we should deprive ourselves of X to obtain $2X$ for another, even if the other already has more than us?
- Most reject this because they accept a Principle of Equality: A fairer distribution of goods is a better distribution.

Inequality OK?

- Parfit thinks that Reductionists should give the Equality Principle less weight
- If personal identity is not deep, then neither are the distinctions between people
- "Just as we are right to ignore whether people come from the same or different nations, we are right to ignore whether experiences come from the same or different lives" (341)

Escaping the prison of the self

Reductionism supports “several changes in our beliefs about both rationality and morality. There are other changes that I have not discussed. The effect on our emotions may be different for different people....the effects may be disturbing...[Speaking for myself] I find the truth liberating, and consoling. It makes me less concerned about my own future, and my death, and more concerned about others. I welcome this widening in my concern” (347).

Coming up

- Debate Wednesday, topic to be posted
- Papers due next Monday
- Next Monday start moral relativism
- Read Harman and Thomson, ch. 6