

## Relation R

Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* (1984). Parfit's work is best seen in the light of the sustained interest in problems of personal identity and the nature of the self that has characterised analytic philosophy in the second half of the twentieth Century.

This interest stems from Descartes and Hume and has been more recently stimulated by Strawson's *Individuals*, and the work of Shoemaker, Williams, Wiggins and others. It has also been an expression of quite general concerns external to analytic philosophy. For many, Part III of *Reasons and Persons*, on 'Personal Identity', where a reductionist view of persons and of their identity over time is set forth, is the most arresting part of the book. The deflationary aspirations seek to convince us that the way most people conceive of their own and others' selves and of the lives that they lead is delusory. Rather than the strict but fictitious personal identity that our concepts presume, the lives of 'people' are better compared to the histories of nations, since personal and national identity are similarly a matter of degree.

The contrast with common-sense intuitions appears sharp. For, as Nagel put it, agreeing with William when asking of any future experience, 'Will it be mine or not' we to need an uncompromising yes or no answer (Nagel, 1986: 34). However, even if, as is common in life, we cannot always have what we need, Parfit's response is to argue that we do not anyway need 'the simple view', and that some of our current intuitions provide better support for his own 'complex view'. Parfit claims that 'what matters' is not personal identity, but Relation R, which is constituted by psychological connectedness and continuity. Connectedness is the more important relation, holding to different degrees and involving memories of previous experiences over longer stretches of time, whereas continuity is formed by 'overlapping chains of strong connectedness (between two consecutive days, say).

Parfit suggests that when continuity and connectedness are much reduced, 'when there has been a significant change or role of life, or of beliefs and ideals we might say, "It was not I who did that, but an earlier self"'. '.

Other difficulties arise from the intrinsically meritorious 'stretching' and contesting of our concepts through in some of Parfit's examples. Thus, a Russian nobleman's intentions in the sustaining of his youthful idealism. He is supposed to give his estates to the peasants when he inherits them. This obligation is secured by legal documentation revocable only by his wife from whom orders to disregard the requests of his 'later corrupted self', should they be forthcoming, for these will not be those of the man who asked her for the promise. '.

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