

## Summary of Discussion

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## SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

DANIEL DENNETT: I think there is something plausible in the claim that, if we abandon Classical Prudence, morality ought to take its place. But I suggest that how we can plausibly appeal to morality in these cases is by objecting to moral blackmail. The reason it's immoral for you not to care about your future self is that when you get yourself in that fix the rest of us will have the burden of caring for you more than we would otherwise. By not taking care of yourself, you put a burden on the rest of us, and that's wherein the immorality of this lies.

PARFIT: You think that's where the *whole* of the immorality lies?

DENNETT: I'm not sure, but I'd like to be shown why this isn't so.

PARFIT: Take Robinsom Crusoe on his island. If he knowingly postpones some pain with the consequence that the pain will be much more painful, this seems to me open to criticism.

DENNETT: But he doesn't seem to deserve *moral* criticism.

PARFIT: I agree that the criticism isn't moral given the way we now think about morality. But in the case of several moral theories, though they allow that you can do what you like with your own life, when we look at the foundations of the theory – Nagel's *The Possibility of Altruism* would be an example – we find an appeal to a kind of impartiality which implies that your reason for bringing it about that there will be less pain suffered is the same in your own case as in the case of other people.

REGAN: Let me add something to that. If we believe that the early self has no obligation to the later self, it is easy also to believe that the early self somehow has the power to consent to the harm done to the later self. If the early self has this power to consent, and somehow represents the whole self, then we may think that there's no real harm done, or at least none that was not consented to.

PARFIT: Or we may think, "It serves him right. He's paying the penalty for his own folly."

RICHARD RORTY: I wonder why you use the premise that if an action is criticizable it must be criticizable either on grounds of

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irrationality or on grounds of immorality. When people say to a young man who is squandering his substance, or risking death or mutilation, that he is being imprudent, you know what they mean. They mean that he's not thinking enough about his future, and this is standard criticism made of the young. But why should it be a criticism of this person as irrational or as immoral?

PARFIT: If we think that imprudence is irrational, then it is clear that in calling someone imprudent we will be criticizing this person. But if we think that there is nothing irrational in imprudence, calling someone imprudent may be making no criticism. It may be a mere description, in the way that describing someone as "unchaste" would not be a criticism for those who believe there is nothing wrong with unchastity.

RORTY: You suggest that, if it does not accuse someone either of irrationality or of immorality, calling someone imprudent would be a mere description. But I don't see why it has to be one of these three. Why can't calling someone imprudent make a criticism of another kind? If you use the word 'immoral' to cover all kinds of criticism except that of irrationality, it ceases to be a worthwhile question whether the criticism is moral.

PARFIT: I agree. I shouldn't have suggested that if some act is neither irrational nor immoral it cannot be criticised. Of course there are other kinds of criticism. An act may be ugly, or impolite, and so on. But it seems to me that, if we cease to think imprudence irrational, but still think that people ought to be criticised for imprudence, the kind of criticism here is more like moral criticism than like criticisms of these other kinds. Robinson Crusoe knowingly brings it about that more pain will be suffered. He knowingly brings about what, impartially considered, is a worse outcome. It's often regarded as one of the ludicrous features of classical consequentialism that it seems to imply that if you make some outcome worse by making it very bad for yourself, this is morally wrong. Consequentialists need to add the proviso that, in this particular case, this is not immoral. I suggest that, if we cease to think such acts irrational, but still think them open to criticism, the simplest change is to remove this proviso. It's because Crusoe's act increases the sum of suffering, and makes the outcome worse, that the criticism of his act seemed to me most plausibly to be a moral criticism. This would involve a change in how we think of morality, but a simple and understandable change.

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE: You appeal to the morality of a classical consequentialist. But few of us accept that. You could appeal instead, more plausibly, to a kind of claim that most of us accept. You could say that, just as each person ought to be especially concerned about certain other people, such as his children, so he ought to be especially concerned about his own later self.

PARFIT: Yes. Good. In most people's moral thinking there are some principles which are impartial. Most people give some weight to the principle of impartial benevolence. But most people give more weight to principles that are 'agent-relative': that concern the agent's special duties to those other people to whom he stands in certain special relations. I suggested that the part of morality which could do the work once done by Classical Prudence could be the principle of impartial benevolence. But you're quite right to suggest that it could be the other part of morality: the part concerned with these special duties. One's obligations to one's own future self needn't be compared with one's obligations to any stranger. They can be more plausibly compared with one's obligations to one's parents or one's children. Or perhaps we can ride both horses at once. We could appeal to both these kinds of moral criticism.

HARRY FRANKFURT: It's a mistake, I think, to talk about having special duties to oneself. I don't think I have any special duties to myself any more than I have special duties to people with whom I have other relationships. It's true that if I make somebody a promise, I have a special duty to do what I promised to do; but I would have this duty to anybody to whom I made a promise; and I would have the same kind of responsibility for my children as I would have for anyone who was in similar relationships of dependency and expectations, and so forth. What's different about my relationships to my children is not that I have special duties to them, but that I love them, and that I want to have a certain kind of relationship with them which I consider to be valuable both to me and to them. What kind of relationship would I have with myself if I couldn't count upon myself to look after my future? This is the kind of question that is at stake, not a question about rationality, or morality. To take the suggested analogy of one's duties to one's children, though this calls attention to the right phenomenon, it uses the wrong category to describe it. It's not a moral question.

PARFIT: You say that it's not morality that's at stake. Not *only* morality, yes. But if you cease to love your children, and therefore

ceased to give them care, most of us would think that you were failing to fulfill your moral obligations to your children. Or consider those parents who do love their children, but who bring their children up in ways that will be bad for their children when they have grown up. The objection here is not that they don't love their children, but that in their concern for their children they ought to think more about their children's futures.

FRANKFURT: I agree, but this is not saying that they are acting immorally, or violating obligations.

PARFIT: But we would say to such parents: "You oughtn't to treat your children like this. They may be happy now, but you're not preparing them for adulthood." I think we would here be claiming that these parents aren't bringing up their children in the way that they ought to, morally.

FRANKFURT: It may be that, partly.

ANNETTE BAIER: It seems to me interesting that Hume held what you call the Complex View, but he has a criticism of people who are concerned only with contiguous and not with remote stretches of their own lives. And his criticism isn't a moral one. He would here appeal to a *calm* but not necessarily moral passion, a "present concern for our past or future pains or pleasures."

PARFIT: This is the common criticism that, if the imprudent person really knew and vividly imagined the consequences of his act, he wouldn't want to do it. This assumes that those who care less about their further futures suffer from what Pigou called "a defect in the telescopic faculty." The same suggestion is made in Plato's *Protagoras*, where it is claimed that, just as objects look smaller when they are further away in space, pains look smaller when they are further away in time. Imprudence is always the result of a kind of ignorance, or cognitive failure. I think that these claims are true in some cases. But they are false in many others. We could sometimes show that they are false like this. We tell someone that he will soon have to make a choice, and we tell him how the different alternatives would affect him for better or worse. We describe in detail what would happen to him, so that he can vividly imagine just how awful or how good these effects would be. Only *after* this do we tell this person *when*, in the different alternatives, the good and bad effects would come. When this person makes his choice, it may be quite clear that he cares less about bad effects if they will be further in his

future. But this will *not* be because he mistakenly believes that they will then be less bad, or because if they will be further in the future he will imagine them less vividly. This person did the imaginative work before he knew about the timing, so his choice cannot be the result of our imagination's tendency to underestimate the further future.

BAIER: You suggest that the timing oughtn't to matter, but aren't there cases where it does – where, for instance, it would be better for certain sorts of pleasures to be enjoyed in youth, rather than postponed, certain other sorts of satisfactions to come later rather than earlier?

PARFIT: Yes. It's a good reason for postponing pleasures that you will then have more time in which you can enjoy looking forward to them. I remember exactly when, at the age of eight, I changed over from eating the best bits first to eating them last.

JIM DOYLE: I'd like to hear both of you say a bit more about the distinction Professor Regan mentioned, namely between oneself and others. I think this may be more flexible on your theory. I've heard confirmed smokers say that they're not harming themselves because they don't want to grow old.

PARFIT: That's a rationalisation.

DOYLE: Perhaps. But, if they were more sophisticated, they might say, "I don't care about my old age because then I will be a different person, and a person about whom I don't much care."

PARFIT: I didn't mention the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity. Of course I might say, for example, that after my marriage I will be a different person. But I'm not here saying that it won't be me, just that I will change in many ways. I think that Regan's suggestion was much bolder: that I can claim that it won't be me in old age. I will have ceased to exist. The old man won't be me at all, but will be a different person. If I accepted this suggestion, the objection to imprudence would be easily and straightforwardly moral. I shouldn't harm other people. If it won't be me who is suffering in old age, I shouldn't harm the person who will be suffering. I don't take this line because the suggestion is just false. It *will* be me in my old age. Our criteria for personal identity clearly cover this case.

REGAN: Since you wanted us both to say something about this, I will say that I am more inclined than Parfit to claim that it will be someone else. And I don't think this suggestion can be so easily

rejected. There is a normal, every-day, well-entrenched descriptive sense in which it is just false that it will not be you in old age. But the more we emphasize this normal sense, the more doubtful it becomes whether this is the sense that is relevant to moral questions. If any sense of personal identity is so relevant, and I have doubts about this, then it is not this normal sense, but some other sense. There are many problems in describing such a sense. But this proposed different sense cannot be rejected as supporting claims that are just false.

PARFIT: Not if it is proposed as a different sense. I was tempted once myself to suggest that we start to talk about successive selves. But, as you say, this raises serious problems. If what we've got within one life holds over different times to different degrees, chopping up the life into that of successive selves will be very crude. It now seems to me better not to talk about successive selves, but to talk directly about the various relations which are involved in the continued existence of the same person.\*

#### NOTE ADDED BY PARFIT

\* In this discussion I did not answer Regan's first criticism. The defender of Classical Prudence may claim that what matters is psychological continuity, which in most lives does not hold to differing degrees. But to defend the Equal Concern Claim, which is near the heart of Classical Prudence, what must be argued is that it is wrong or irrational to think that connectedness matters. Of the two general relations, continuity and connectedness, I don't believe that we can plausibly claim that only one of the two is what matters. If the defender of Classical Prudence cannot plausibly criticise someone who believes that connectedness matters, my argument survives.