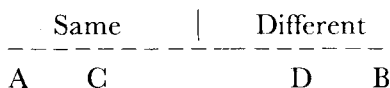


AN AMBIGUITY IN PARFIT'S THEORY OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

Howard Curzer

Imagine that scientists perform a series of experiments replacing person A's physical and psychological properties with those of person B. Each experiment in the series involves the replacement of one more property than the preceding experiment. This series is Parfit's *Combined Spectrum*. It is a combination of the Physical Spectrum where all of the properties are physical, and the Psychological Spectrum where all of the properties are psychological.

The Non-Reductionist says that there is a sharp borderline dividing the Combined Spectrum into two stages such that, upon crossing the borderline, person A suddenly becomes person B. That is, if A and C are on the same side of the borderline, then person A and person C are the same person, but if A and D are on different sides of the borderline, then person A and person D are different persons. I shall call this the *two stage* view.



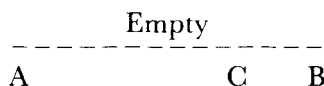
Parfit, on the other hand, says that no such sharp borderline can exist because every point on the Combined Spectrum differs only trivially from adjacent points, and because a sharp borderline would, in principle, be undiscoverable.

Between neighbouring cases in this Spectrum the differences are trivial. It is therefore hard to believe that, in one of these cases, the resulting person would quite straightforwardly be me, and that, in the next case, he would quite straightforwardly be someone else. It is also hard to believe that there must be such a sharp borderline, somewhere in this Spectrum, though we could never have any evidence where the borderline would be. (p. 239)¹

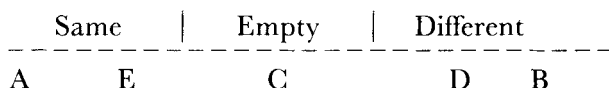
I shall argue that Parfit vacillates between two alternatives to the Non-Reductionist, two stage view. According to what I shall call

¹ All parenthetical references are to Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

the *one stage* view there is no sharp borderline which distinguishes identity from difference. No matter where on the spectrum C is, person A and person C share certain properties and do not share certain other properties. There is no more to know about their identity over and above that. The question, 'Is person A the same as person C?' is always empty. Person A can never meaningfully be said to be the same as or different from person C without stipulation.²



The second alternative to the Non-Reductionist view is what I shall call the *three stage view*. According to this view person A is the same as person E if A and E are very close to each other on the spectrum, and person A is different from person D if A and D are very far from each other on the spectrum. But if A and C are neither very close to each other nor very far from each other, then the question, 'Is person A the same as person C?' is empty.



To use a less fanciful example than the Combined Spectrum, the two stage view says that as time passes and I age, I will remain the same individual until I change one key physical or psychological property. Then I will become a different individual. I will be 'born again.' The three stage view says that I will remain the same person through a few changes, but after several days or weeks the question of whether I am the same person or a different person will become empty. The one stage view says that this question becomes empty as soon as any change takes place.

Sometimes Parfit sounds like an advocate of the one stage view. He says,

Both in the central cases in [the Psychological] Spectrum, and at the far end, there is not a real difference between the resulting

² Of course we could *stipulate* that a certain point in the spectrum is the borderline, that all persons on the left of this stipulated point are identical to A and all persons on the right are identical to B. 'But, since our choice was arbitrary, it cannot justify any claim about what matters . . . I regard this view as one version of Reductionism, the tidy-minded version that abolishes indeterminacy with uninteresting stipulative definitions.' (p. 241)

person's being me, and his being someone else . . . The question about identity is, here, empty. (p. 283–284)³

Considering birth and death, Parfit claims that a person gradually comes to exist and gradually ceases to exist.

On the Reductionist View, we do not believe that at every moment I either do or don't exist. We can now deny that a fertilized ovum is a person . . . [Similarly,] a person can gradually cease to exist some time before his heart stops beating. (p. 322–323)

At the two ends of life the question of whether the person exists is empty.⁴

The one stage view follows directly from Parfit's Reductionism. (1) Parfit reduces facts about existence and identity of persons to facts about psychological and physical properties of persons. 'If I know the facts about both physical continuity and psychological connectedness, I know everything there is to know' (p. 214). The defining thesis of Reductionism is that personal identity does not consist in any further fact. (2) Now a question is empty if and only if 'The question merely gives us different descriptions of the same outcome. We could know the full truth about this outcome without choosing one of these descriptions' (p. 260. See also p. 213 and p. 233.). Thus, if C is any point in the Empty area then, once we know which properties person A and person C share and don't share, it would convey no additional information to say that person A and person C are the same or different. The question, 'Is person A the same as person C?' is empty if and only if (a) 'Person A and person C are the same' and (b) 'Person A and person C are

³ This quotation is not a complete statement of the one stage view since it does not go on to say that the question is empty for cases at the near end.

⁴ The one stage version of the Reductionist View says, (a) If person A and person B differ by a few physical and/or psychological properties then the question of whether person B is the same as person A is an empty question. The passage quoted from page 322–323 presupposes, (b) If a person and an 'entity' differ by a few physical and/or psychological properties then the question of whether the 'entity' is a person is an empty question. Parfit seems to be assuming that (a) implies (b), but this is not obvious. The criterion of personal existence might behave differently than the criterion of personal identity.

This is a special case of a more general problem. Parfit argues for the plausibility of his reductionist view of personal identity by appealing to an analogy between (a) the transformation of an acorn into an oak, and (b) the transformation of person A into person B (p. 322. See also p. 232.). Transformations (a) and (b) are, however, very different. In transformation (a) an individual changes from one kind of thing to another. A kind boundary is crossed without loss of identity. In transformation (b) no kind boundaries are crossed, but an individual changes identity.

different' are merely different descriptions of the same outcome. (3) So once we know the facts about psychological and physical properties of persons the question of personal identity is empty. Questions about sameness and difference of persons are empty, because the answers can somehow be reduced to these facts. (4) Parfit does not restrict his Reductionism to the middle of the Combined Spectrum. Facts about sameness and difference of persons can be reduced to facts about psychological and physical properties of persons at any point of the Combined Spectrum. (5) It follows that questions about sameness and difference of persons are empty not just in the middle of the Combined Spectrum, but at any point of the Combined Spectrum. This, of course, is the one stage view.

Sometimes Parfit sounds like an advocate of the three stage view. When discussing the Psychological Spectrum Parfit says,

The resulting person would be me in the first few cases. In the last case he would not be me. In some of the intervening cases, neither answer would be true . . . This question is, here, *empty*. (p. 232–233)

Later, when discussing the Combined Spectrum, Parfit says,

There is sometimes a real difference between some future person's being me, and his being someone else. But there is no such real difference in the cases in the middle of the Combined Spectrum. (p. 277. See also p. 234–235, 266, 282.)

When discussing commitments, Parfit uses the jargon of 'successive selves.' He supposes that I make a promise to you. Then he says, 'Suppose that you change much more than I do. I may then regard myself as committed, not to you, but to your earlier self' (p. 327). This way of talking suggests that I am still the same person as the promiser, even though I have undergone a few changes, while you are not the same person as the promisee because you have undergone lots of changes. Thus, Parfit's 'understandable and natural' (p. 327) way of talking in this section presupposes the three stage view.

Both the one stage view and the three stage view have unpalatable consequences. According to the one stage view, any physical or psychological change in a person (no matter how trivial) would make it meaningless to say that he or she remains the same person. If I forget the color of my toothbrush, it is meaningless to say that I am the same person I was before. Of

course, it is meaningless to say that I am a different person, too. The question of whether I am the same or different is empty. Similarly, the question of whether I am the same as Napoleon or different from Napoleon is empty. He and I share certain properties and not others. That is all that there is to the matter.

In Part IV of his book Parfit defines Same People Choices as choices between two actions, neither of which affects the identities of future people. 'All and only the same people [would] ever live in both outcomes' (p. 356). Parfit suggests that there are many Same People Choices, although they 'are not as numerous as most of us assume' (p. 356). However, if the one stage view is true, then there are no Same People Choices.⁵ Consider, for example, the choice of whether or not to punch Joe. The individuals resulting from these two choices will share most physical and psychological properties, but some of their physical and psychological properties will be different. According to the one stage view, it is meaningless to say that the resulting individuals are the same or different. We cannot meaningfully say that all and only the same people would ever live in both outcomes. Thus, the choice of whether or not to punch Joe is not a Same People Choice. The Non-Identity Problem arises. That is, punching and not punching cannot be meaningfully said to produce the same individual, we cannot say that one choice is better for Joe than the other.

Presumably, Different People Choices are choices between two actions such that different people would live in the two outcomes. If the one stage view is true then there are no Different People Choices, either. The overwhelming majority of choices will not produce people who are clearly the same or different, but will instead produce people for whom the question of sameness and difference is empty.

The one stage view has the virtue of simplicity, but the three stage view has the virtue of corresponding more closely to common sense and ordinary language. We generally think and talk as if a person can undergo a few minor physical and/or psychological changes without affecting his or her identity. There are two versions of the three stage view. The borderlines of the Empty area might be sharp or fuzzy.

⁵ Are there any actions which change no person's physical or psychological properties (not even the properties of the actor)? If so, then a choice between two such actions would be a Same Person Choice even under the one stage view. I, however, do not think that there are any such actions.

Same Empty Different			Fuzzy Same /// Empty /// Fuzzy Different		
A	CD	B	A	CF	E B

When criticizing the two stage view, Parfit says that no sharp borderline can exist on the spectrum because every point on the spectrum differs only trivially from adjacent points, and because a sharp borderline would, in principle, be undiscoverable. Obviously, these objections also apply to the sharp borderline version of the three stage view.

To put it another way, the sharp borderline version of the three stage view implies that if C and D differ only trivially then the questions 'Is person A the same as person C?' and 'Is person A the same as person D?' might have different answers. An advocate of the two stage view might ask the following question. If there is only a trivial difference between the areas of Same and Empty and between the areas of Different and Empty, then why can't there be only a trivial difference between the areas of Same and Different?

Before I criticize the fuzzy borderline version of the three stage view I must provide a bit of exposition. Roughly speaking, a borderline is fuzzy rather than sharp if and only if the points just on either side differ non-trivially. More precisely, a fuzzy borderline between area X and area Y is a relatively small area such that it is unclear (to speakers of the language) whether a point in the borderline is in X or Y.⁶ 'Is the point in X or Y?' is an empty question because the terms 'X' and 'Y' are vague. [The other way in which such a question might be empty is when it is clear (to speakers of the language) that the terms 'X' and 'Y' do not apply.]

X	///	Y	Same	///	Different
Fuzzy			A	Z	B

If X = Same and Y = Different, then we have a fuzzy borderline version of the two stage view. The terms 'Same and Different' are vague. If Z is a point in the fuzzy borderline between Same and

⁶ Could there be a *large* area of emptiness due to vagueness, a *large* fuzzy area? No. Vagueness and, therefore, fuzziness occurs only on borderlines. If *per impossible* there was a large fuzzy area between area X and area Y, then a point near the middle of the fuzzy area would clearly be in neither area X nor are Y. 'X' and 'Y' would, in other words, not be vague in the middle. Instead it would be clear that they did not apply. So the middle area would be empty, but not fuzzy.

Different, then 'Is person A the same as person Z?' is an empty question because of this vagueness. Thus, the Fuzzy area is an Empty area. The fuzzy borderline version of the two stage view could also be described as a three stage view with a very small Empty area.

The fuzzy borderline version of the three stage view is more complicated. It implies that if C and D differ non-trivially then the questions 'Is person A the same as person C?' and 'Is person A the same as person D?' might have different answers. On the fuzzy borderline version of the three stage view $X = \text{Same}$ and $Y = \text{Empty}$. If C is a point in the Same area, then it is clear that person A and person C are the same. Similarly, if E is a point in the Empty area then it is *just as clear* that we cannot say whether person A and person E are the same or different. The question, 'Is person E the same as person A?' is not empty because of vagueness, but rather it is empty because the terms 'same' and 'different' are known not to apply. The term 'empty' is known to apply. No term is vague. The question is empty in the second way mentioned above. The Empty area is not a Fuzzy area. However, if F is in the fuzzy borderline between Same and Empty, then it is *not clear* whether we can say whether person A and person F are the same or different. The terms 'same' and 'empty' are vague. The question, 'Is the question "Is person F the same as person A?" empty or not empty?' is empty because of vagueness. (That is, if $Q = \text{'Is A the same as F?'} and $R = \text{'Is Q empty?'} then question R is empty because of vagueness). Thus, the Fuzzy area is not an Empty area. (We might call the Fuzzy area 'Metaempty'.)$$

The fuzzy borderline version of the three stage view is only slightly better off than the sharp borderline version. If fuzzy borderlines can separate the Empty area from the areas of Same, and Different, then a fuzzy borderline can separate the areas of Same and Different for each other. So the fuzzy borderline version of the three stage view allows a fuzzy borderline version of the two stage view. This concedes much. In particular, it concedes that the question of whether two people are the same or different might be empty only when the people are very similar.

But the fuzzy borderline version of the three stage view has a much worse problem. It is incoherent. Suppose the Empty area has fuzzy borderlines. What does it mean to say that F is a point in a Fuzzy area? F is not in the Empty area, so it is not true that (once we know which properties person A and person F share and don't share) it would convey no additional information to say that person

A and person F are the same or different. In other words, it *would* convey additional information to say that person A and person F are the same or different. But this implies that F is in either the Same area of the Different area. Thus, there is no Fuzzy area. The Empty area has sharp borderlines.

This is an important and difficult point, so I shall re-argue for it. (1) Suppose that the Empty area has fuzzy borderlines. Then asking of a point within a Fuzzy area whether that point is within the Empty area will be an empty question. To say that the Empty area has fuzzy borderlines is to say that there is some F such that question R is empty. (2) Now it follows from the definition of 'empty question' that question R is empty if and only if (a) 'Q is empty' and (b) 'Q is not empty' are different descriptions of the same outcome. That is, there is no fact of the matter about whether Q is empty. We know 'everything' without knowing (a) or (b). But what is this 'everything'? (3) There are only two possibilities. (4) If 'everything' is just all of the properties which person A and person F share, then F is in the Empty area. Q is really empty. (5) If 'everything' is all of the properties which person A and person F share plus whether person A and person F are the same or different, then F is in the Same area or the Different area. Q is really non empty.⁷ (6) Either way, F cannot be within a Fuzzy area. Question R cannot be empty. The question, 'Is the question "Is person A the same as person F?" empty or not empty?' is never empty. Whether a point within the Fuzzy area is within the Empty area is not an empty question. The answer is either definitely yes or definitely no. (7) Therefore, there are no points in the Fuzzy area. There is no Fuzzy area. The borderlines of the Empty area are sharp rather than fuzzy. We have reached a contradiction.

In summary, Parfit seems to be advocating the one stage view of personal identity at some points and the three stage view at other points. Neither view works. The one stage view is elegant, but has consequences which are counterintuitive and incompatible with Parfit's later claims. The three stage view is commonsensical, but one version of the three stage view is vulnerable to an argument made by Parfit himself, while the other version is incoherent.

I believe that the arguments I have presented are very general. Nothing crucial turns on the peculiarities of Parfit's version of

⁷ Could there be a third possibility? After all, I seem to have assumed that either there is a determinate fact of the matter (for some matter), or there is no determinate fact of the matter. But could there be no determinate fact of the matter as to whether there is a determinate fact of the matter?

Reductionism or even on the fact that it is personal identity at issue. If X gradually becomes Y, then anyone who is a Reductionist must accept either the one stage view or the three stage view about the X – Y continuum. Thus, I believe that my arguments against these two views could, with suitable modifications, be applied to the other Reductionists in addition to Parfit. But that would be a project beyond the scope of the present paper.⁸

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No, for this would mean that 'everything' is indeterminate. It would make Parfit's definition of 'empty question' meaningless.

⁸ I wish to thank Edward Craig, Daniel Nathan, Walter Schaller, Bruce Thompson, and especially Edward Averill and Shelly Kagan for helpful criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper.