

Self and Self-Interest

Marya Schechtman

ABSTRACT. One of the main themes of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* is the intimate interconnection between questions of personal identity and questions of practical reason. Identity theorists have paid much attention to Part III of the book, where he offers his theory of personal identity and draws implications for the rationality of self-interest, but much less to Part II, where he argues directly against the rationality of self-interest, with strong implications for personal identity. In Part II Parfit argues that the self-interest theory (S) cannot survive attack on two fronts: from present-aim theories on the one side and morality on the other. In this paper I defend S from Parfit's attack and draw the implications of this defence for theories of personal identity. I argue that the version of S that Parfit attacks is not the only possible version, and offer an alternative, S*. I show further that Parfit's version of S is closely linked to the punctual theory of personal identity he offers in Part III. S*, on the other hand, supports and is supported by a narrative conception of identity. Parfit's arguments against S thus stand or fall with his ability to defend his picture of personal identity. By providing a plausible set of alternatives, this paper shows that neither Parfit's view of self-interest nor his view of identity is as inevitable as he claims.

KEY WORDS: narrative, personal identity, practical reason, prudence, self, self-interest

One of the main themes of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* is the intimate interconnection between questions of personal identity and questions of practical reason. In particular, he shows how the traditional theory of rational self-interest, which holds that we have special reasons to be concerned about all and only our own experiences, depends upon the belief that personal identity over time is a deep and important relation. Parfit's goal is to undermine each of these standard views. In Part III of the book, he famously argues that identity is not as profound a relation as we have thought, and uses this result to defend a Utilitarian morality against objections based on the rationality of self-interest. Philosophers interested in questions of personal identity have devoted a great deal of attention to his arguments there.

What is less well-appreciated by identity theorists, however, is the wealth of resources offered by Part II of *Reasons and Persons*, which essentially argues for the reverse direction of the implication drawn in Part III. Before Parfit develops his theory of personal identity, he wages a direct attack on the self-interest theory, one that does not depend upon his later conclusions about the nature of personal identity. And while Parfit does not explicitly draw the implications of his attack on self-interest in Part II for identity, they are quite loudly implied. If he succeeds in showing that there is no justification for caring about our future experiences in any different way than we care about the experiences of anyone else, identity obviously cannot be as deep or important a relationship as we think it is. Studying the arguments of Part II can thus help the theorist of personal identity to both understand and criticise Parfit's views. It can aid understanding by illuminating the shared basis of his complaint against traditional views of personal identity and self-interest. It can help with criticism of Parfit's view by providing another avenue of attack. A defence of the self-interest theory against Parfit's objections will necessarily involve an explication of the connections that justify a special kind of concern for all and only our own experiences, and this will in turn provide clues to the connections which could constitute a significant relation of identity over time.

In what follows I provide an example of the kind of insight that can be gained for the identity theorist by engaging with Part II of *Reasons and Persons*. Parfit's arguments here are, like most of his work, extremely dense and subtle, and it is not possible to do them justice within the scope of a paper. I will therefore concentrate on one small but key move in his argument against the self-interest theory, showing how it can be answered, and indicating the ways in which this answer can deepen our understanding of personal identity. My main focus will be on the arguments of Part II themselves, ending with a very brief sketch of their implications for personal identity, which is meant to point the way toward a more in-depth analysis. I begin, however, by setting the context.

I

To begin it will be helpful to have an overview of the basic shape of Parfit's argument in Part II. The three major players here are:

- (1) The self-interest theory (S), which holds roughly that the most rational course of action is always that which maximises self-interest over a person's entire life.
- (2) The Critical Present Aim Theory (CP), which consists of the Present Aim Theory (roughly the view that a person has most reason to do whatever best meets her present aims) together with the additional stipulations that (a) these aims must be chosen under conditions of ideal deliberation and (b) some aims may be rationally required (or prohibited).
- (3) Morality (M), which says roughly that a person has most reason to do whatever will maximise everyone's well-being.

Parfit considers two different ways of reading each of these views, based on two different conceptions of well-being. On the desire-fulfilment view, well-being is defined in terms of the satisfaction of desires; on hedonistic accounts it is defined in terms of pleasure (where this can, of course, be broadly construed). A desire-fulfilment version of S, for instance, holds that the most rational action is that which would maximise desire-fulfilment over the course of a person's entire life; a hedonistic version says the rational action is that which maximises pleasure over a lifetime. Although these are distinct, the desire-fulfilment version clearly has a connection to the hedonistic version, as desire satisfaction is intrinsically pleasurable.

Parfit argues that both versions of S face the same danger of dual attack by CP on the one front, and M on the other. His basic strategy is as follows: first he undermines what might seem the strongest support for S: the intuition that we have a special relation to all and only our own experiences which gives us unique reasons to care about them. The existence of such a relationship would indeed justify S: it would explain (against M) why a person should be especially concerned with the nature of his own experiences (they are his), and why (against CP) he should be equally concerned with all of them

(they are all equally his). It may seem a brute fact, obvious to anyone, that whether an experience is his or not is relevant to whether a person should care about it while the fact of *when* it occurs is not; and this is all S requires.

This strategy works well, Parfit says, if we concentrate only on the future as most discussions of rationality do. It comes undone, however, if we ask about the attitude we should have to our pasts; and in particular whether it is rationally permissible to discount the past in favour of the present and future. Even the most dedicated self-interest theorists, Parfit assumes, will not insist that we should really take an attitude of complete temporal neutrality with respect to our lives, counting each desire or experience equally. It seems clear, on the contrary, that rationality often seems to *require* a bias against the past. Once this fact is recognised, however, the S-theorist must concede that it is not just the fact that an experience is mine that gives me reason to care about it. Past experiences, after all, are as much mine as present and future experiences.

Given the rationality of bias against the past, Parfit suggests, the S-theorist will need to provide some basis for a person to be as concerned about future experiences as she is about those in the present besides the mere fact that future experiences will also be hers. It is in this endeavour, Parfit says, that the S-theorist gets caught between CP and M. Whatever reasons an S-theorist can give for neutrality with respect to one's present and future experiences can be turned against her by the M-theorist who can show it to apply equally as a reason for neutrality between one's own experiences and those of others. If, on the other hand, the S-theorist tries to defend herself against M with an argument supporting a bias in favour of oneself, that argument can be used by CP to show that bias towards the present is also justified. Once the simple argument that "all of my experiences are equally mine, and no one else's are mine at all" is undermined as a basis for S, Parfit claims, no other argument can survive attack on both fronts.

The claim that we have reason to discount our pasts in rational deliberation is thus a crucial step in Parfit's argument against S, and it is this claim I will critically evaluate in what follows. Parfit provides two separate discussions of the rationality of discounting the past, corresponding to the two conceptions of well-being he describes. He

starts with the desire-fulfilment version, which he believes is somewhat simpler; I, too, will concentrate on this version. A careful analysis of the issues he raises here has much to tell us about both self-interest and self.

II

The desire-fulfilment version of S says that a person has most reason to do what will fulfil the most of her desires throughout the course of her entire life. Desires should, of course, be weighted according to their strength and centrality, but given these weights the most rational course of action is that which maximises desire-fulfilment. Parfit asks us to consider, however, whether the S-theorist can seriously mean that we might have reasons to fulfil desires we no longer have, no matter how powerful or important those desires once were. Taken at face value, he says, S implies that if our past desires were, when we had them, stronger than our present desires are now, we may have more reason to fulfil desires we no longer have than to try and do what we now most want to do. Parfit says this flies in the face of common sense. If we no longer want what we once wanted, he says, certainly we no longer have reason to try and achieve it, no matter how strong the desire was when we had it.

This might, of course, be true without undermining S, as Parfit readily admits. All temporal neutrality demands is that we give equal weight to all of the temporal portions of our lives, but within that constraint there are other considerations – like the strength of our desires or their coherence with one another – which can give us reason to ignore some desires, or at least to count them for less. Perhaps, then, our past desires get discounted on some ground besides their mere temporal location, and the S-theorist can acknowledge that we have little reason to act upon them while still calling for temporal neutrality throughout the course of a person's own life.

In some cases, Parfit replies, we do discount past desires not because they are past, but for some other reason. He goes on to argue, however, that this is not always the case, nor is it always a help to the S-theorist when our reason for rejecting past desires is something

Personal and Moral Identity

Musschenga, A.W.; van Haaften, A.W.; Spiecker, B.;
Slors, M.V. (Eds.)

2002, VI, 327 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0764-4