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Despair, Liberation & Everyday Life: Two Bundle Views of Personal Identity *Kathy Behrendt*

Philosophy sometimes has the reputation of dealing with matters outside the realm of 'everyday life', and trading in ideas that float free from anything beyond the armchair in which we sit contemplating them. I want to talk about a standard armchair-branch of philosophy – personal identity theory – and the real-life effects it either has had or has apparently failed to have upon two philosophers. The two philosophers are David Hume and Derek Parfit. Both arrive at similar and quite radical beliefs about personal identity. And both have documented the difficulty of sustaining these beliefs in their day-to-day lives. For those considering embarking upon philosophical study – whether formally or not – this last point may seem discouraging, reinforcing a picture of a discipline that even on the admission of its own practitioners has little impact on everyday life or concerns. I will explore these two philosophers' views on personal identity in some detail, and outline the conflicts which they claim to exist between their philosophical and non-philosophical thinking. I will go on to propose that these conflicts do not in fact reinforce an opposition between everyday life and philosophy.

David Hume's brief discussion of personal identity has been highly influential.¹ A key aspect of his account is captured by his following, famous remark: 'For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.'² Having gone to look for a self in the sense in which it was commonly understood in his time – a single, enduring entity that stays the same throughout our lives – all Hume finds instead is a collection or 'bundle' of constantly and rapidly changing thoughts, sensations, and perceptions. He concludes that, as far as he can see, persons are nothing but bundles of changing mental properties, with no identity over time.

But Hume is very concerned with why we have the ideas that we do, and he cannot deny that we *think* we are enduring persons that survive and persist throughout the many changes that go on in our minds. This belief in personal identity arises, he speculates, from our observation that the various, distinct impressions in my mind succeed one another over time, and resemble one another, and appear to be causally linked – one thought giving rise to another. The result is still a bundle of diverse parts, but a bundle that is tied together by these relations of closeness in time (or as he calls it, 'contiguity'), resemblance, and causation, so as to give rise to the illusion of the identity of ourselves over time. Although philosophical reflection about the matter forces us to admit that there's still no single thing to be found that endures throughout the related impressions, Hume says that 'we cannot long sustain our philosophy'. We will invariably yield to the non-philosophical belief that we are the same thing over time – a self, or soul, or substance, all of which are fictions of our imagination.³

This non-philosophical conviction about the identity of the self is held by those who Hume sometimes, rather unflatteringly, calls 'the vulgar'. It is important to understand that the vulgar are not a separate and perhaps lower class of people. Vulgarity is,

rather, a state of mind in which we all participate at some time or another, and no one is more ready to admit to vulgar tendencies than Hume himself. And his vulgar tendencies persist in spite of the fact that he clearly recognises that there is no room for his philosophical views within the vulgar frame of mind. This leads him grimly to contemplate the possibility that all our ‘reflections very refin’d and metaphysical have little or no influence upon us.’⁴ In some of the most personal passages to be found in the philosophical literature of his time, Hume goes on to confess that the apparent contradictions that he has unveiled between our vulgar fictions (which include our idea of our identity) and his metaphysical reflections (which reveal that the idea is ill-founded) have plunged him into ‘the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ’d with the deepest darkness.’⁵ Happily, he notes, nature ‘cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium’ – he describes how he has dinner, gets together with friends, and plays a few games of backgammon, upon which his philosophical quandaries are forgotten, leaving him free to indulge his vulgar attitudes without any feeling of turmoil.⁶

Derek Parfit, writing some 240 years after Hume, came to some similar conclusions about the self.⁷ Like Hume, Parfit denies that there is any evidence for a single, enduring self or person. A person is a collection of fleeting, disparate parts. Unlike Hume, Parfit does not restrict his attention to the mind but also includes the brain and the rest of the body amongst those parts. The result is still a bundle theory, since the brain and body are also made up of many different and changing parts. While the molecules of my brain and the rest of my body may not replace themselves at the rate at which my thoughts do, they nevertheless do, all of, them, change or disappear throughout my lifetime, given I live long enough. In contrast to Hume, Parfit opts for a somewhat more relaxed notion of identity by which, if all the changes in my mind and body continue on as normal, with no radical breaks or divisions (e.g. I don’t lapse into a coma, or develop severe amnesia, or have my still-functioning brain divided in half by surgeons and transplanted into the empty skulls of two waiting recipients – a favourite fantasy in personal identity theory), I can be said to remain the same person throughout my life.

What is striking are not Parfit’s views about normal personal identity, but certain other conclusions he draws from the Humean starting point that persons come in bundles. These conclusions concern what matters to us with respect to our future existence. ‘What matters’, in this case, carries a rational and moral sense, meaning that it concerns how we should act towards ourselves and others as moral beings with certain desires that we wish fulfilled. For Parfit, how we should act should be dictated in large part by the metaphysical facts about personal identity – by what kind of things we are. If we recognise that there is for each of us no single thing (like a soul) that endures throughout our lives and which truly constitutes who we are, then we cannot, rationally speaking, be concerned for or worried about the preservation and flourishing of this thing, self, soul, or whatever we call it.

The only reasonable candidates for what ought to matter to us are the ones already mentioned – the brain, the rest of the body, and the mind or psychological content (beliefs, wishes, hopes, aspirations, personality traits, and so forth). Amongst those candidates, Parfit holds that it is the psychological content that is generally the focus of our main concerns about our future; with the possible exception of, say, super-models and athletes, most of us place more importance on our mind continuing on

unimpaired in the future than our body. In particular, we want our desires and ambitions fulfilled or at the very least to have the opportunity to fulfil them. And we want our thoughts, beliefs, memories, and personality to continue on – perhaps not in the same way, as we may wish for advancement or improvement, but without any radical breaks or lapses. In short, to use Parfit's terms, we want the future to involve psychological continuity and connectedness to ourselves in the present.

However, Parfit argues, all these things could continue, while we ourselves ceased to exist, or our continued existence became an indeterminate matter. Such a thing may never actually happen, but it is nevertheless a logical possibility. Consider a variation on the previously-mentioned brain division and transplant thought-experiment. Imagine you will divide overnight like an amoeba, into two new, physically-alike persons both of whom will 'inherit' all your psychology – your thoughts, memories, personality and so forth. I say two new persons because any other description seems implausible; we can't say that you remain as one person with two bodies, since both embodied 'halves' of you would be spatially distinct and could go on to lead disparate lives. They may meet later and have a falling out and one kill the other in a fight – a situation which would seem to make it impossible to talk reasonably of there being one person. Perhaps, you could argue instead, there is only one new person, and you survive as one of the two products of the division, the other half being someone else (a copy perhaps?) But on what basis could it be said that one post-division person rather than the other is really you? They are by definition exactly alike in terms of the features they have at the moment of division. Maybe we could just pick one. Yes, certainly, but this would be an arbitrary decision made for the sake of convenience and not on the basis of any metaphysical fact – metaphysically speaking, as said, the two halves have all the same features.

While we might intuitively be appalled at the prospect of our division, we shouldn't be, according to Parfit. For although one cannot reasonably be said to survive such a division, what matters to most of us does. Our beliefs, hopes, memories, ambitions, and personality, all survive. In this case, they survive twice over. This is nothing like death, it seems, and may even be better than normal life – if you knew this were going to happen to you soon, you could plan to go to university straight away after school and also have a gap year.

One's response to all this may be, so what? Since we don't divide like amoebas the above sort of speculations could not result in new metaphysical beliefs about our actual selves. But this is not so. The amoeba thought-experiment is an exercise to get us to recognise certain facts about ourselves. In normal life, identity goes together with psychological continuity and connectedness, and so we are not forced to choose between them, and can easily mistake our concern about one for concern about the other. But thought experiments like the amoeba one are meant to show that psychological continuity and connectedness can come apart from identity and exist without it, and so are different from it. Once we recognise this then even in normal cases involving unproblematic identity of ourselves over time, we will, Parfit hopes, realise that it is not this identity itself but the separable psychological continuity and connectedness that matters to us.

These conclusions that Parfit arrives at concerning what matters to us in survival all result from his initial, Humean, metaphysical view that a person is nothing more than

a complex entity made up of fleeting and changing parts. If the view that he and Hume rejected were true – if a person were ultimately a single, enduring entity that continued to exist unvarying throughout all these changes – then Parfit could not draw the conclusions that he does. Because such an entity has no parts and so by definition is not divisible, Parfit would have to conclude that it would be destroyed upon division, or would go with one of the products of the division (we might not be able to tell which one, but there would still be a fact of the matter). But Parfit does not think there are such entities, and so he must accept what he believes are the consequences of the metaphysical view he does hold, and those consequences are that psychological continuity and connectedness matter and personal identity does not.

These consequences are positive, as far as Parfit is concerned. The recognition that there is no single, unchanging self that endures throughout our lives, means that, even in cases of normal lives, what we call our identity over time is a matter of degree. Even if we don't divide or undergo sudden radical physical or psychological change, we do change over time and therefore our present self may be more or less connected with our past or future self, depending upon the extent of changes between them. Realising this can help us to alleviate negative emotions and attitudes such as fear of death, egoism, and regret about the passing of our life, all of which gain their strength, according to Parfit, from the false belief that it is I, the *exact* same person, who is involved throughout. Parfit also sees positive ethical consequences of his view.

My concern about my distant-future self, with whom my psychological connections are weak, will be more like my concern for other people to whom I am not currently connected. Therefore I have reason to act in a more altruistic, less self-interested way; my actions on behalf of my future self should not be radically different than my actions towards other people. While none of these consequences that Parfit discusses are without controversy, the point remains that he at least finds them extremely positive and even, in his word, 'liberating'.⁸

This is in sharp contrast to the feelings of darkness and despair into which we saw Hume driven by his own philosophical views. Even if Hume's dining and gaming tendencies show that his life was not ruled by despair, an appendix he added to the *Treatise* makes matters look even more bleak. There he makes clear that the relations which bind together the bundle of thoughts and perceptions that constitute a self are not *real*; each of the perceptions are distinct existences that have the potential to exist apart from one another, and human understanding is incapable of discovering real connections between distinct existences. So the bundle falls apart. We have lost both the single, simple soul and the changing but unified bundle of perceptions and, it would seem, have thereby well and truly lost 'our selves' in any meaningful sense of the term. Surely this *is* cause for despair. How could anyone who believes it continue on the same as he or she did prior to such a realisation? And yet continue on Hume does. He leads a long and, if his own accounts are to be believed, quite happy life, filled with travel and friendship and the pleasures of the everyday. Perhaps the most obvious explanation for this, is that he simply cannot bear the truth that philosophy has revealed to him, and shuts it out of his mind in order to get on with his life. As we shall see, though, this is not his own explanation.

If the negativity of Hume's philosophical conclusions were the best explanation for his failure to sustain them, then the opposite should hold true for Parfit. Unlike Hume,

he discovered a positive outcome could emerge from the same metaphysical starting-point.⁹ Inspired by his liberating views about personal identity, Parfit, we might expect, has no reason to attempt to distract himself from them through dining, backgammon or any other means. And yet, very much in keeping with Hume, Parfit also speaks of the considerable difficulty he has in sustaining his philosophical convictions. In passages reminiscent of Hume's contrast between philosophy and vulgarity, Parfit talks of a split between the 'reflective or intellectual level' of thinking and some 'lower level'.¹⁰ The reflective level concerns the metaphysical truth of the matter and the lower level what we are generally inclined to believe. Parfit confesses that when he forgets or fails to concentrate on his philosophical views he slips back into the sort of egoistic self-concern that is not rational according to his own arguments.¹¹ But why is this so, if unlike Hume, he finds his conclusions to be positive? Why is even a reputedly beneficial truth hard to believe?

To answer this, it may help to return to Hume, and note that it is not because his philosophical beliefs are depressing that he has trouble sustaining them. Rather he indicates that philosophical beliefs and thoughts – pleasant or unpleasant – are difficult to sustain, producing as they do only 'mild and moderate sentiments'.¹² Parfit at times seems to be of similar opinion; it is not that the truth is good or bad, but that it is hard to sustain any view that conflicts with the status-quo of everyday thinking (or lack thereof) about the matter; our everyday thinking is, as it were, our 'default position', and according to that mode of thinking, each of us is a single, enduring person whose identity is fixed and stable, and not a fiction or a matter of degree (witness your own, likely less-than-cheerful response to the prospect of your division). Hume and Parfit's agreement on this matter is reinforced when we look at the explanations that they both give for our everyday thinking. Hume says it arises from our 'nature' or instinct; like many other things we perhaps ought not, philosophically speaking, to believe, we cannot help but doing so. We are part of nature and as such are subject to its dictates. Parfit, like Hume, believes that our tendency to cling to this notion has something to do with the kind of beings we are. He holds that we human beings are, for better or for worse, in possession of the concept of a single, enduring and unchanging self; it is built into the structure of our thought and so this concept continues to work its influence upon us even once we know better.¹³

To sum up, we have in Hume and Parfit examples of two philosophers who, while passionate and articulate about their philosophical beliefs, nevertheless and upon their own admission cannot easily sustain those beliefs. We also have some indication as to why this is so, namely that it is built into our nature or our conceptual scheme that it could not be otherwise. Does all of this serve to reinforce the sort of view mentioned at the outset, namely that certain philosophical ideas – be they negative or positive – have little to no effect on our everyday lives, but occur, if at all, in a vacuum?

Before we proclaim a complete victory for vulgarity over philosophy, we should be very careful about how we depict their opposition. Hume himself is very careful in this regard, in that although he treats vulgar impulses as 'natural' he does not view philosophy as somehow unnatural. Indeed he remarks that we (many of us at least) are also naturally inclined to philosophise ('tis almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like those of beasts, in that narrow circle of objects, which are the subject of daily conversation and action'¹⁴), and so long as we are compelled to do so we ought

to do so, and in doing so the thoughts that ensue, though no doubt requiring more mental effort than backgammon, will not be unnaturally forced. The worst thing one can do, as far as Hume is concerned on this matter, is to have an inclination to philosophise but suppress or reject it. Hume is not simply driven away from philosophy and into the real world – he is catapulted back and forth between them in a relentless though often exhilarating fashion, and by the same natural forces.¹⁵ If we treat philosophical speculation as not the enemy of natural inclination but an extension of it, we can view this swinging back and forth as two interdependent rather than opposed activities. They are interdependent because the loss of one is a loss for the other: clearly, unrelieved philosophical contemplation is not possible and would be detrimental to one's overall well-being as far as Hume is concerned; but likewise the complete denial of philosophical impulses is also damaging. As Hume proclaims, regarding his philosophical impulses, 'these sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition; and shou'd I endeavour to banish them, by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, I *feel* I shou'd be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy'.¹⁶

Similarly for Parfit, the conflict between aspects of his philosophical and his non-philosophical thinking does not constitute a complete separation of them. While Parfit acknowledges the difficulty of sustaining his carefully considered views on personal identity, it in the end amounts to no more than that: a difficulty, but one which he strives to overcome in the interest of the truth. 'The truth is very different from what we are inclined to believe', he is fond of stating.¹⁷ It is therefore harder won. It is perhaps not surprising then that we often opt for the easiest way of getting by, neglecting or setting aside beliefs which are apparently true. But the fact that such beliefs are harder won and as a consequence perhaps more rare is not reason to view them as not properly belonging to and impacting on our lives as a whole. Parfit makes clear that despite his lapses, his views on personal identity have had a profound affect on his life: prior to establishing those views, he writes, 'I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air.'¹⁸

I started out with a contrast between philosophy and everyday life. But I think we should now see this as a false opposition. It is without doubt that any view which suggests that our identity is a fiction, or is something that does not matter, is extremely daunting. It is possible that even if we concentrated all our effort upon sustaining such a view we would on occasion fail.¹⁹ This failure may, as speculated, have less to do with the nature of the view in question than with our human nature or the way our minds are constructed. Whatever the reason, the fact that both Hume and Parfit find it difficult and sometimes impossible to sustain their philosophical convictions or act purely in accordance with them does not detract from the fact that these convictions are a fundamental part of their whole lives, which would be poorer without them.

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¹ The discussion can be found in Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, D.F. Norton and M.J. Norton, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Book I, Part 4, Sect. 6. There are also some brief but significant remarks on the subject to be found in his Appendix to the *Treatise*.

² Hume, pp. 164-165.

³ Hume, p. 166.

⁴ Hume, p. 175. The whole of the Conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise*, from which this and the following passages are taken, is an eloquent examination of the place of philosophy in life.

⁵ Hume, p. 175.

⁶ Hume, p. 175.

⁷ Parfit's most detailed and bestknown account of his views on personal identity is to be found in his *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), Part Three, and all my citations of Parfit are from that work, unless mentioned otherwise.

⁸ Parfit, p. 281.

⁹ See Parfit p. 282 for his view on the difference between Hume's conclusions and his own.

¹⁰ Parfit, p. 279.

¹¹ Parfit, pp. 279-280.

¹² Hume, p. 176.

¹³ This is a point which he develops in 'The Unimportance of Identity', in H. Harris (ed.) *Identity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 13-45.

¹⁴ Hume, p. 176.

¹⁵ Again, see his Conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise* for a detailed account.

¹⁶ Hume, p. 176.

¹⁷ Parfit, p. 281.

¹⁸ Parfit, p. 281.

¹⁹ Though Parfit suggests that Buddhism may be the nearest thing to a full-time implementation of his view; see *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 273, 280, and Appendix J.