

Williams and Parfit

March 26, 2001

1. Williams against body-switching

The spectrum of cases:

- (i) amnesia
- (ii) amnesia plus character change
- (iii) amnesia plus character change plus new fictitious “memories”
- (iv) as (iii), but the “memories” are designed to fit those of B
- (v) as (iv), but done by transferring information from B’s brain
- (vi) as (v), but with a reverse operation performed on B’s brain

Argument 1: If the person in charge tells me that one of these operations is going to be performed on me, and that I will then be tortured, I should be scared.

Argument 2: Since I should be scared, it must be *possible* to survive any of these processes while remaining in the same body—otherwise I shouldn’t be scared, since I shouldn’t believe the person in charge.

Argument 3: if the A-body person is no longer A after operation (vi) is performed, then the A-body person is no longer A after operation (v) is performed. If so, then the A-body person is no longer A after operation (iv) is performed. If so, then the A-body person is no longer A after operation (iii) is performed.... There’s no good place to draw the line, so we end up having to say that the A-body person is not A even if only operation (i) is performed!

2. Williams against indeterminacy

Why can’t we just say that it’s *indeterminate* where in the series the cutoff occurs?

...this well-known piece of advice, sensible as it is in many cases, seems in the present case to involve an extraordinary difficulty. It may intellectually comfort observers of A’s situation; but what is A supposed to make of it? To be told that a future situation is a borderline one for its being myself that is hurt, that it is conceptually undecidable whether it will be me or not, is something which, it seems, I can do nothing with; because, in particular, it seems to have no comprehensible representation in my expectations and the emotions that go with them.
(193)

3. Identity in fission cases

Suppose one person, A, walks into the fission machine, and two people, B and C, walk out. What are the facts about identity in this case? There are several possible views.

1. $A = B$ and $A = C$.

Problem: this implies (by Leibniz's law) that $B = C$, which is clearly false.

2a. $A = B$ and $A \neq C$

2b. $A = C$ and $A \neq B$.

Problem with these views: what could make one true and the other false?

3. $A \neq B$ and $A \neq C$

3a. A ceases to exist when the fission machine does its thing.

Problem: 'How could a double success be a failure?'

3b. A continues to exist, as the fusion of B and C .

3bi. ...and B and C aren't really people, but only parts of people.

Problem: if B and C live sufficiently different lives, it's just obvious that they are people.

3bii. ...and B and C are people even though they are parts of a bigger person.

Problems: footnote 8

4. Parfit's view of fission cases

(i) A bears all the relations that matter in survival to B and C , even though A is not identical to B or C . A "survives as" each of them, if we use "survives as" in a way that doesn't imply identity but does imply the presence of what matters in survival.

(ii) There is *no fact of the matter* as regards which description of the case in terms of identity is the correct one.

When Parfit says that we should 'give up the language of identity' in such cases, he means both of these things: inquiry into the facts about identity doesn't have the practical significance that we initially assume it would have, and in any case there aren't any right answers to be had.

5. Parfit on what matters in survival

It would be irrational, 'inconsistent', to treat the prospect of fission as if it were as bad as the prospect of death (p. 205). So 'what matters in survival need not be one-one'.

Moreover, and more importantly given that we don't actually have to worry about fission, the relations that matter come in degrees.

The relations that matter are relations of psychological continuity and connectedness.

6. What matters in survival comes in degrees

Thought experiments:

Fusion

People who reproduce by fusion
People who reproduce by fusion and fission
Immortals

Part of what makes X at t matter to Y at t is direct psychological **connectedness**: Y at t has q -memories (“memory traces”) of things that happen to X at t ; Y at t does actions q -intended by X at t , etc.

Continuity—the relation that obtains between X at t and Y at t if there are a $Z_1 \dots Z_n$ and $t_1 \dots t_n$ such that X at t is connected to Z_1 at t_1 , and Z_1 at t_1 is connected to Z_2 at t_2 , and... and Z_n at t_n is connected to Y at t —may also matter somewhat. But connectedness matters too.