



SURVIVAL AND THE REDUPLICATION ARGUMENT

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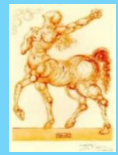
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Survival and the Reduplication Argument

ABSTRACT.⁰ The aim of the article is to point out that Derek Parfit's answer to the Reduplication Argument is unacceptable in its actual form. Parfit's answer is unacceptable because it is based on his view on the personal survival and this view has some very important deficiencies. The structure of the article is the following: I begin with a presentation of Parfit's answer to the Reduplication Argument of Bernard Williams. Then, I present his view on the survival of the person and I identify the main deficiencies of this view. Finally, I explain why do I consider that his answer to Williams's argument is unacceptable.

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I. Introduction

The aim of this article is to point out that Derek Parfit's answer to the Reduplication Argument of Bernard Williams is unacceptable in its actual form. I shall argue that Parfit tries to answer to this argument by substituting a stronger relation (that of personal identity) with a weaker relation (that of personal survival) but he does not succeed in providing a viable response because his view on survival has some important deficiencies.

The article will be structured as follows: I shall begin with a presentation of Parfit's answer to the Reduplication Argument of Bernard Williams. After that, I shall present Parfit's view on the survival of the person and I shall specify which are, in my opinion, its main deficiencies. Finally, I shall explain why do I consider that his answer to Williams's argument is unacceptable.

II. Parfit's Answer to the Reduplication Argument

According to Williams's argument, a real criterion of personal identity has to be a one-one relation and not a one-many relation. In order to fulfil this condition, a relation proposed as a criterion of personal identity should not take a branching form. Williams directed his argument against the psychological criterion of personal identity, according to which the identity of a person in time is provided by the continual existence of a series of mental elements (e. g., memories, beliefs, desires, intentions). He proposed some thought experiments and he tried to prove that the psychological continuity might take a branching form, reason for which it cannot be accepted as



a criterion of personal identity. Of course, these thought experiments are already classical in the philosophical literature and I shall not insist on them. Anyway, it is a fact that almost every advocate of the psychological reductionism (the view according to which the identity of the person in time is provided by some sort of psychological continuity and/or connectedness) tries to find a viable answer to this argument. One of these advocates is Derek Parfit himself.

Parfit's answer to the Reduplication Argument is, in short, the following: the psychological continuity and/or connectedness cannot always provide the identity of the person in time (for example, it does not provide the personal identity when it takes a branching form) but it guarantees the survival of the person in time. According to him, a person can survive even in a situation in which the psychological continuity and/or connectedness takes a branching form because, in such a situation, a person will have as many survivors as branches of its psychological continuity and/or connectedness. Saying it otherwise, Parfit substitutes a stronger relation (that of identity in time) with a weaker relation (that of survival) without abandoning the idea that the psychological continuity and/or connectedness is the criterion of the relation (I have to specify that I consider the relation of identity in time to be stronger than the relation of survival because, differently from the later one, it does not take a branching form).

This way of solving the problem may be successful if Parfit's view on survival is complete and satisfactory. But, as I shall point out in what will follow, this view has some important deficiencies that entitle us to consider it incomplete and unsatisfactory. Before specifying which are these deficiencies, I shall present, firstly, Parfit's opinions about the person's survival.



III. Parfit's View on the Person's Survival

According to Parfit, in order for a person to survive it is not necessary its physical continuity but only its psychological continuity and/or connectedness. He considers that: *physical continuity is the least important element in the continuous existence of a person*¹, because *it would not matter if my brain would be replaced with an exact duplicate*². Even in a situation in which this duplicate would be an artificial one, the psychological continuity and/or connectedness would not be affected and, consequently, the person would survive.


Parfit says, also, that the personal identity does not really matter. Thus, he considers that what fundamentally matters is not the personal identity but the psychological continuity and/or connectedness with any cause, named by him *Relation R: Personal identity is not what matters. What fundamentally matters is Relation R, with any cause. This relation is what matters even when, as in a case where one person is R – related to two other people, Relation R does not provide personal identity*³. The Relation R with any cause is what really matters because it guarantees the personal survival (even in those situations in which it does not provide the identity of the person).

In order for a person to survive it is not necessary that its mental elements have a continual existence. What it is important for the personal survival is the continuity and/or connectedness of the previous mental elements with the present ones. But let

¹Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987, pp. 284.

²Ibid., pp. 285.

³Ibid., pp. 217.




us take into consideration the case of a transfer of mental elements from one brain to another. What kinds of mental elements and, especially, how many mental elements should be transferred in order to guarantee the personal survival?

Parfit does not say anything about the kinds of mental elements but he makes some comments about the percent of mental elements that should be transferred in order to provide the survival of the person. According to him, when the percent of transferred elements is slightly more than 50%, we may say that the person survives; in those situations in which the percent is of around 50% (the central cases) we cannot answer to the question if the person survives or not; finally, when the percent is slightly less than 50%, we may consider that the person does not survive. In the next section of the article, I shall analyze Parfit's standpoint regarding the percentage of mental elements that provides the survival of the person and I shall specify why do I consider that this standpoint is an important deficiency of his view on survival.

A questionable idea formulated by Parfit is that a person may survive in many different persons. According to him, if there is Relation R between one person X and two other persons Y and Z, then Y and Z are the survivors of X. Although this idea contradicts any common intuition, it is useful because it helps Parfit to avoid Williams's Reduplication Argument. Thus, he is not forced to deny that the psychological continuity takes a branching form; he admits this but he claims that, even if Y and Z are not identical with X, neither of them is totally different from X (as Williams is trying to prove) because X survives in them.

In a nutshell, this is Parfit's view on survival. In what will follow, I shall identify the main deficiencies of this view.




IV. The Main Deficiencies of Parfit's View on Survival

One of these deficiencies is that Parfit does not explain clearly what he means by the survival of the person.

According to him, I can survive even when my psychological continuity is provided through unnatural causes. For example, he suggests that a person might survive with an electronic brain and with an artificial body. It follows from this that an android might be the survivor of a living person. Is this survival or something else? Etymologically, the term *survival* means to continue to live. Do I really continue to live when some data from my brain are transferred into an artificial device? It is clear that this is not biological survival. But can we say that something else than a biological organism can survive?

Such a proposal, according to which there are other kinds of survival, different from the biological survival, is counter-intuitive. Being counter-intuitive, it should be based on strong arguments in order to persuade someone to accept it. Does Parfit produce such arguments? No, he does not. He just speculates about data transfers from biological brains to non-biological brains (transfers that he considers to be possible) and about the essential role of such a transfer in the survival of the person. He does not explain what exactly he means by the term *survival* and *why* does he think that a transfer of information from one brain to another is sufficient in order to provide the person's survival.

Taking into account the fact that he does not produce such arguments, I think that there are not enough reasons to consider that, in the absence of biological survival, a




simple data transfer is sufficient in order to provide the survival of a person. Because, if we accept that a data transfer provides survival, we will have to accept, also, that a computer will survive when some data from it will be transferred into another computer.

But let us suppose that it is possible some kind of psychological survival and that, in order for a person to survive, it is not necessary its physical continuity but only its psychological continuity and/or connectedness. This is the position that Parfit defends. According to him, if some data from my brain are transferred into an artificial brain, I shall survive. The problem is that he does not specify what kinds of data should be transferred in order to provide my survival.


Although he does not say what kinds of data should be transferred, he specifies what is the percent of transferred data that may provide the personal survival. Thus, he thinks that if slightly more than 50% of our mental elements would be transferred, we are entitled to say that we will survive. In order to establish if Parfit is right, I shall propose, in what will follow, a thought experiment.

Thus, let us consider the possibility that two twins have almost the same mental elements (e. g., factual memories, beliefs, desires, etc.) and that they are subjects of an experiment in which their mental elements are transferred to other brains, which are either natural or artificial ones. What if only 58% of the mental elements of each of these twins will be transferred and the mental elements that are transferred from their brains will be identical? And what if these mental elements will be transferred into one and the same brain at different times? For example, let us say that the mental elements of one of the twins will be transferred at a time t_1 into a brain and the mental elements of the other twin will be transferred at a time t_2 into the same brain. If this



thing happens, Parfit is confronted with the problem of individuation because, if we accept his view on survival, we shall not be able to determine which one of the two men survives after the second transfer. Intuitively, we are tempted to affirm that both of them survive. Unfortunately, someone who admits Parfit's view in its actual form cannot prove such an intuition because, in a case as the one I described, his view does not offer any method by which the two persons could be differentiated.

The situation becomes even more complicated if we consider that the mental elements that were transferred are only factual memories and beliefs. This is not impossible if the factual memories and the beliefs are the main part of the mental elements of the twins. But is it enough that only two kinds of mental elements to be transferred in order for a person to survive? According to Parfit's view, if these two kinds of mental elements represent slightly more than 50% of the total of the person's mental elements, it will be enough. But, even if we admit that a person is just a bundle of mental elements, it is difficult to accept that it consists only of factual memories and beliefs. A person is something more complex than that. The bundle of mental elements that constitute the person contains, beside the factual memories and beliefs, intentions, desires, hopes, personality traits, feelings, etc. You are entitled to say that a person will survive when some of its factual memories and beliefs will be transferred, only if you consider that these factual memories and beliefs constitute the core of the person, its essential part. But Parfit does not say anywhere that some of the mental elements that constitute the person are more essential than others. As long as the factual memories and beliefs that are transferred are not the essential part of the person, there are no sufficient reasons to accept that their transfer provides the survival of the person.




Of course, we can imagine many such thought experiments in which only one or two kinds of mental elements constitute more than 50% of the person's mental elements. What should be pointed out is that, in order for a person to survive, it is not important only the percent but also the kinds of mental elements that are transferred. Parfit does not specify what kinds of mental elements should be transferred and this is an important deficiency of his view on survival.

Another weak point of his view is that he does not explain clearly what is, in his opinion, the nature of the mental elements that constitute the person and, especially, what is the relation between these mental elements and the physical elements of the brain. As long as we do not know these things, it is difficult to understand how can be realized the transfer of mental elements from one brain to another.

It seems that Parfit does not think that the mental elements have a physical nature because, in such a case, they would be identical with elements of the brain, situation in which the transfer would be impossible (the mental elements might be transferred from one brain to another without the psychological continuity and/or connectedness to be affected only if these elements are not identical with the physical elements of the brain). If the mental elements are not physical, their nature could be non-physical or even functional. Unfortunately, we cannot decide what is the nature of the mental elements because Parfit is not sufficiently explicit.

As regarding his position about the relation between the mental elements and the physical elements of the brain, he says that the mental elements are caused by the physical elements but he omits to specify if the later are, in their turn, caused by the first. That is why, it is not clear if he is an epiphenomenalist or a functionalist. What is significant for our issue is that, in either of these cases, he has to explain how is it



possible to transfer the mental elements from one brain to another without damaging the psychological continuity and/or connectedness. Regrettably, he does not give any such explanation. The truth is that it is difficult to give such an explanation because, as long as the mental elements are caused by the physical elements of the brain, it seems to be impossible to replace the brain without damaging, in one way or another, the psychological continuity and/or connectedness. Inevitably, when the transfer will be made, there will be a short interval in which there will be no cerebral cause and, consequently, no mental effect. The fact that Parfit does not explain how is it possible to make such a transfer constitutes, also, a deficiency of his view on the personal survival.

In the last section of the article, I shall summarize the deficiencies of Parfit's view and I shall explain why do I consider that his answer to Williams's argument is unacceptable.

V. Conclusion

In brief, the main deficiencies of Parfit's view on the survival of the person are the following:

- a) – he does not explain clearly what he means by the term *survival* and he does not specify which are his reasons for considering that a transfer of mental data from one brain to another is sufficient in order to provide the personal survival;
- b) – the view is excessively lax because Parfit does not formulate restrictive conditions for the application of the term *survival*;
- c) – he does not specify what kinds of mental elements should be transferred in



order for the person to survive;

d) – it is not clear why does he think that a percentage of slightly more than 50% transferred mental elements might provide the personal survival;

e) – Parfit does not explain clearly what is the nature of the mental elements and he does not give a complete description of the relations between mental elements and physical elements.

f) – he does not explain how is it possible to transfer mental elements from one brain to another.

As we can see, almost every important element of Parfit's view on the person's survival is insufficiently explained. There are some terms that he does not define and some fictional processes that he does not describe clearly and accurately. It follows that Parfit's view is not only counter-intuitive but it is, also, incomplete. That is why I consider that, as long as Parfit does not eliminate the deficiencies that I pointed out, his view on the personal survival is unacceptable.

The problem is that Parfit uses his view in order to answer the Reduplication Argument of Bernard Williams, which is one of the strongest arguments that were directed against the reductionist solutions to the personal identity problem. From the fact that his view is unacceptable, it follows that Parfit's answer to Williams's argument is, in its turn, unacceptable in its actual form. Consequently, this argument continues to be a problem for him, as it is a problem for all the other advocates of psychological reductionism.



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