

Why Thinking about the Future Is Rational
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In our everyday lives, we seem to know what it is to be a prudent person. Consider, for example, someone who aspires to be a celebrated baker, the next Famous Amos. In this case, it is easy to anticipate what this person (let's call him Extraordinary Larry) would need to do in order to succeed, to be prudent. He would do well in high school in order to ensure acceptance into a good culinary institute, then schedule courses that focused in baking and work hard to pass these classes, make sure to have an adequate amount of experience on the job before putting his own reputation on the line in his own business venture, and save money to put into equipment and a facility. Larry would do all of this in order to make his life in the future as good as possible, in the hope that he would someday be able to enjoy the benefits of his current labor. This idea of prudence as a special concern for one's future may be termed the Self-Interest Theory, which states that "for each person, there is one supremely rational ultimate aim: that things go as well as possible for himself" (Parfit 1984, 307). Derek Parfit, however, argues that such a self-interest is unjustified when it is applied to one's future, according to the normative consequences of his reductionism of personal identity to psychological relations.

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In Parfitian reductionism, the nature of human psychology allows for branching from one person into multiple duplicates that may become very different from one another, and stages of personhood that become more distantly related over time. It then seems as if the conventional concept of a person over time is really more like a consecutive sequence of stages or selves that happen to share some rather arbitrary features, such as a name or an appearance. This calls into question the prudence of acting in the name of one's own future self-interest, as the self that is doing the work will not be the same self that reaps the benefits. Rather, acting to help a future self is either irrational, or can only be justified as a different sort of obligation, such as a moral responsibility. In light of his reductionism, Parfit sees no reason to deny his "Extreme Claim," that one ought to deny a special concern for one's own future because the future self is only distantly connected to the present (1984, 307, 313).

Of course, a stable populace is not one who endorses only doing that which provides immediate gratification. In order to avoid the consequences of Parfit's normativity, philosophers have typically either tried to dispute the metaphysics in order to avoid the normative consequences it necessitates, or they have accepted the metaphysics, but disputed that it entails any kind of normativity, including the Extreme Claim. It will be argued here,

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however, that there are ways to maintain the rationality of future self-interest, even while granting Parfit's metaphysics and the argument that the future self is too far removed to justifiably treat it at oneself. In other words, even if one only cares about the present self, it is not just moral, but also prudent, to act in a way that benefits the future self. This is the case because it is beneficial to the present self, regardless of any advantages for the future, to do the things that are typically seen as sacrificing for the future. Even if Larry at age 16 is a Parfitian reductionist, it will be argued here that he is rational for making and executing plans to ensure that future persons will become known as Extraordinary Larry, precisely because those plans are also beneficial to the 16 year old. In most situations, a Parfitian reductionist like Larry could in fact act in the same manner as he would by using the Self-Interest Theory. In Section 1, Parfit's metaphysics will be discussed and contrasted with the received view. Section 2 will cover the normative principles associated with each, and Section 3 will discuss potential consequences of Parfit's normativity. In Section 4, it will be argued that concern for the future is salvageable as a benefit to the present self, and that if this is the case, the consequences of Parfitian reductionism are not as severe or radical as one might think.

Section 1 – The Metaphysics

Parfit has argued that what matters to survival of a person is the continuation of a psychology, both resemblance of features such as dispositions and desires as well as features with causal influence, including intentions and memories. If survival is reduced to psychological continuity through person stages, then what matters in terms of remaining the same person is a relation that can branch and weaken over time. For example, consider Larry the baker. In normal circumstances, it seems that Larry's psychology would be unique to him, and that being Larry would involve having memories, intentions, character, and so on, from some point in Larry's life. Thus his identity, a one-one relation, consists of his psychological features as well as the fact that they are unique to him. It is conceivable, however, that the uniqueness can become questionable, and that the psychological relations could no longer be one-one. Parfit discusses two such possibilities. First, in his 1971 article "Personal Identity," Parfit discussed a surgery resulting in each half of the brain, fully functioning when separated from one another, being put into separate bodies. Later, in *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit used the potential results of a transporter that could send information about his body to Mars where a replica is created. In both of these cases, the two resulting people are both psychologically continuous

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with the original, “both resulting people have my character and apparent memories of my life” (Parfit 1971, 375).

As in Parfit’s example, Larry could enter a transporter and exit on the other side on Mars. If this process were done through a destruction of Larry’s Earth body, and a recreation of it on Mars that encompasses every aspect down to scars and hangnails, common sense would say that the new version would numerically and qualitatively still be Larry. What if the destruction aspect of the machine failed, and he awoke on Earth with an exact duplicate on Mars? Each Larry remembers growing up with his mother’s chocolate chip cookies, acing Home Economics in high school, and going through culinary school. Each, initially, has the same desires and goals, everything from having a craving for Oreos to wanting to retire in Fiji. Numerically, though, there are clearly two bodies that will each begin to develop in ways that differ from the other.

The baker on Earth and the one on Mars each survive as *Larry* because of psychological connectedness and contiguity, which make up Parfit’s R-relation. In addition to psychological connectedness, “the holding of particular direct psychological connections” such as having a memory or continuing a past intention, a person also has psychological continuity. Parfit defines psychological continuity as “the holding of overlapping chains of *strong* connectedness,” with strong connectedness meaning

“enough” connections (1984, 206). Enough being “at least half,” although Parfit admits that there is really no plausible, non-arbitrary definition. Presumably, on the day of fission, the Larrys can remember half of what Pre-Fission Larry did the day before. If this is the case, then the duplicates are psychologically connected to, but not necessarily numerically identical with, Pre-Fission Larry, through desires, intentions, memories, and the like. Larry is psychologically connected to himself from the day before, and so on, and this creates a psychologically continuous chain. Under Parfit’s system, a person would be reducible to his or her R-related stages, whatever happens to make up their physical self that supports the existence of those stages, and causal processes.

Because the ego has been discarded in Parfit’s system, R-relations can weaken over time, making it possible for survival to be a notion that comes in degrees. For instance, if Earth Larry falls in love with a dentist, he may see the horrible things that sugar can do to one’s teeth, and change his career goals to become a lobbyist for more nutritious school lunches. Mars Larry, in a desperate effort to avoid his counterpart after returning to Earth, could run off to France and become a pastry chef. Perhaps Pre-Fission Larry was more like the his Mars duplicate than he is to Earth Larry, because both Mars and Pre-Fission share an affinity for baking, but nonetheless, Pre-

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Fission Larry is no longer qualitatively identical to either of the resulting people. Thus Pre-Fission Larry survives in *degrees* in each existing person, in one more so than the other, according to how strong the R-relations are (Parfit 1971, 384). If the baker had not been divided, he may have experienced the events that happened to one of his duplicates, and may have changed in the same ways. In this case, too, his later self is only R-related to his former self to a certain degree, and thus the former has only survived to that degree. Not only do R-relations have the potential to branch, but they also weaken over time, allowing for former selves to be replaced by new ones that are only minimally related to what came before, insofar as psychological resemblance and causal connections are concerned. Even without fission, radical changes can occur in one person over time, just as they did in each of the post-fission Larrys. Because of this, Parfit thinks that the R-relatedness of two given selves is more important in normative matters than the conventional perspective of identity lasting through a lifetime.

Section 2 – The Normative

Under the traditional view of personal identity, there is a common thread, whether the ego or a relation, stringing together the entirety of a person's lifetime. Thus at any given time, a person is connected to every other temporal stage of his or her life, and so it is prudent to act in a

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manner that most benefits a lifetime as a whole. It would be irrational, for instance, for Larry to skip a final at culinary school to keep sleeping because it could be detrimental to his grade, to his academic record, and eventually to his career. If he is intimately connected to his future self in the way that an ego connects all of the temporal parts of a person, then this argument seems to hold. He can make commitments and goals that span his lifetime, without feeling as if he is making present sacrifices for nothing. Parfit, however, argues against any sort of fact aside from psychological continuity. How, then, should Larry act to be prudent, if he became a Parfitian reductionist regarding the nature of his personhood? Does anything change? Parfit says yes, because the future self is so distantly related to the Larry who is in culinary school. This makes the future self as unrelated as a separate person, and this disconnect is honored in the normative consequences.

Parfit argues that his reductionism necessitates a shift in how one ought to behave toward persons, both to others and to oneself. He writes, “if we cease to believe that our identity is what matters, this may affect some of our emotions, such as our attitude to ageing and to death” (Parfit 1984, 215). Susan Wolf disagrees that the metaphysics has the resources to necessitate any normative claims (1986). It may be argued however that reductionism has very real normative impact, on issues as

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radically different as abortion, law enforcement, rehabilitation of criminals, and being bound to commitments. As Parfitian reductionists, we will hold the individual R-related parts of a person in higher regard than the person over a lifetime, just as we might discount the well-being of a nation as a political entity in favor of benefiting its citizens. We see the citizens of a nation as having separate rights from that of the nation itself. In an ideal world, citizens ought not be punished for the wrongdoings of their country, for instance. These claims regarding what should and should not be done are normative, determining standards for behavior.

The way that reductionism impacts normative claims revolves around the acceptance or rejection of the Self-Interest Theory, which states that “for each person, there is one supremely rational ultimate aim: that things go as well as possible for himself” (Parfit 1984, 307). Some would argue that, if all that comprises a person over a lifetime is having enough psychological connections, then self-interest ought to be limited to the best interests of the temporally immediate person. One should not sacrifice happiness now in order to achieve long-term goals, for instance, because there is no good reason to justify sacrificing for someone who is only related through distant psychological connections. The Extreme Claim, this kind of denying a special concern for one’s future, plays an important role in Parfit’s expectations for the impact of his

theory. If it is accepted as a sole guide, one no longer creates long term goals, and this reduces psychological connectedness in that it reduces intentions over time. Although he also discusses the plausibility of “the Moderate Claim,” in which “Relation R gives us reason for special concern,” Parfit finds no reason to accept it over the Extreme Claim, which he prefers as he finds it “liberating, and consoling,” in matters such as contemplation of his death (1984, 347).

***Section 3 – The Consequences: The Good, The Bad,
and the Ugly***

The Extreme Claim (which denies that we ought to have a special concern for our futures), and more importantly, the weakening of R-relations, is significant in such matters as punishment and commitment (Parfit 1984, 326). If it is easier to separate what would normally be called a person into stages that are only minimally related because of changes over time, then it is problematic to expect one to take punishment for a crime that was committed by what could be considered to be another being (Parfit 1984, 326). Although this seems radical, it is already reflected in social practices, such as statutes of limitations and cases of temporary insanity, allowing for changes in a person over time, or great changes in light of unusual circumstances. If a person has had enough time to change, or if they were radically out of character, they are often not punished. Thus

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our already existing practices have some element of this theory in mind, and entirely eliminating the concept of personal identity may not be so radical after all. Just as we see in statutes of limitation, or reducing sentences for rehabilitated criminals, if survival and continuity happens in degrees, Parfit argues that a person can only be punished to the degree that they are R-related to the person who committed the crime.

This is not to say that all of the consequences of Parfit's theory are reflected in our practices. For instance, if one makes a commitment to a person now, and that person changes to the point where he is no longer himself, Parfit argues that one can only be expected to honor the commitment to the former person who no longer exists. In turn, the new person also cannot be expected to honor any commitment made, even if the other person has not changed, because the commitment was made by another (1984, 327). These consequences seem problematic to the way we behave, signing contracts and making commitments for mortgages, marriages, and the like, although it is telling that we have developed ways to get out of many of these situations, including declaring bankruptcy and filing for divorce. Another consequence of reductionism, as was mentioned earlier, is the solace it provides when contemplating one's own death. It is unlikely that the self Parfit is at present will be strongly

related to the self who will be present at his death, so the present self is not concerned, just as he would not be concerned with the eventual death of someone who he does not know very well, and with whom he does not have much in common (1984, 347).

Susan Wolf has a substantially more negative outlook on the consequences of Parfit's reductionism, even though she accepts the metaphysics. A primary reason she cites for rejecting Parfit's normative claims is the potential they have for changing society as we know it for the worse. One of her concerns is that, since R-relations come in degrees, it will then be presumed that we are only expected to care about one another, including our children, in proportion to the degree they are R-related to us (Wolf 1986, 710). Another major objection she raises is the power of Parfit's theory to reduce motivation to pursue long-term goals.

It may be argued that consequences such as those raised by Wolf may be avoided. We can do so while keeping some of Parfit's benefits and without appealing to morality as a way to act on behalf of the future self.

Section 5 - Conclusion (future self to come up with a clever section title)

Parfit does not endorse honoring *only* R-relations, as Wolf notes. He does not claim that R-relatedness is the only thing that one should care about, just as our exact

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similarity, either to ourselves in the future or to those we care about now, is not the only factor determining who and what we care about now. For instance, one thing we care about in anyone is “the value, in my view, of this person’s physical and psychological features” (Parfit 1984, 299). On Wolf’s interpretation, improvements to oneself would be changes in the degree to which they were R-related, and thus one would care about that successful future self less than if they were to stay exactly the same. Moreover, Parfit argues that we at least ought not do that which hurts our future selves as a matter of morality (1984, 319). This does not address benefiting the future self as a matter of prudence, but it shows that there are factors external to R-relations that must be taken into account. Those that will be argued for here are ones in which it actually benefits the present self, and thus is prudent, to have a concern for the future.

Parfit argues in *Reasons and Persons* that he can rationally care less about his future self because it is less connected to him (1984, 313). When the special concern benefits the *present* self, however, the amount of connection is irrelevant. Thus it seems that there is a way to preserve a special concern for the future without refuting the metaphysics or the link to normativity, to keep it even while accepting Parfit’s system of weakening R-relations, something that Parfit does not acknowledge.

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In this way, Wolf could avoid the consequences of Parfit's Extreme Claim, even if Amy Kind is right, that the metaphysics legitimately influences normativity.

One major factor that could help to save much of our traditional concern for ourselves and our loved ones is the idea of altruism, of acting for the good of others. There are other benefits as well, ones which aid one's *present* self specifically. Just as some people donate money or other goods in order to feel good and make a name for themselves, one can save money, develop their capabilities, and improve their self in order to create a legacy for their present self, for D_{22} . Perhaps one's future self, D_{30} will be grateful to their previous self for the work that went into generating who they are currently. Surely, one's D_{22} present self will not tangibly experience the rewards, but the present self will be *remembered*, which tends to be a motivating factor in humanity as a whole. D_{22} will be happy expecting that a person she does not even know will be grateful to her someday, and will feel good knowing that she is doing something to make someone else happy. Another way to think about it is in the case that one wants to do something detrimental to their future selves. In this case, if one were to sabotage their future selves' happiness, they will be remembered as the self who blew it for the rest of their selves, and nobody wants that.

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This approach to justifying a special concern for the future applies to Wolf's parental case, as well. One wants to do right by their children, but there is often an element of selfishness in this aim. Many people want to be good parents so that they can be remembered by their children as such, so that they can pass themselves on in memories of a future generation. Why would parents name their children after themselves, if a kind of survival were not a desired outcome of parenting? This includes not only psychological survival, but genetic or physical survival as well. Why else would there be such a cultural emphasis on bearing one's own children, rather than adopting? Additionally, parents are supposed to love their children unconditionally, thus *without any regard* to their R-relations. Factors such as these may explain why parents can love their children just as much in adulthood even under Parfit's reductionism, because parents want to be remembered as good at all stages in their lives, and because part of being a parent is entirely separate from R-relations.

There are other benefits for the present self in having a special concern for the future. Without making long-term plans and then working toward those goals, and experiencing hope for success, a person would miss a major part of the human experience. Without having any long-term aspirations, a person would never do something that would have a payout that took more than a few

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weeks, and it seems clear that this would be detrimental to that present self. It would be difficult to justify becoming educated, for instance, as it is meant to benefit a future self. Furthermore, even if it were undertaken because the present self just wanted to be in school, education is so life-changing that the present self would have to be suicidal (that is, willing to be replaced by a future self) in order to go through with it. The actual experience that the present self would have is presumably more rewarding, however, than is working only enough to provide immediately self-gratifying experiences. Larry in culinary school, for instance, is having a better time than he would be as a short-order cook making enough to live and experiment in his kitchen on days off. Even though a present self only lasts for a short amount of time, it benefits from working toward a not-yet-realized goal. This is even true in the case of education, in which a present self is literally sacrificing itself for a brief experience and for the legacy it creates.

Imagine how unfulfilling life would be without a single ambition, even if those ambitions were never to be realized. In the case of acting on behalf of a future self, however, long-term ambitions *are* often achieved, if only by someone distantly related to the present self. To use another analogy, this is similar to the case of a scientist working on a very long-term project. A pharmaceutical researcher can work on a cure that he knows is decades

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ahead, also aware that he will be retiring soon. Working toward that cure, though, is beneficial to him, as he realizes that he is making progress toward something bigger than he could achieve on his own, and he is doing work that others will remember him for later.

It is understandable that people want to think they have the same selfhood over a lifetime, personal identity in a conventional sense, so that they can collect the future rewards of their past hardships. If one thinks about the benefits of reductionism, however, and how it already fits into current practices, Parfit's theory can seem pretty appealing. There are already ways for a culture such as ours to deal with people changing, including debt forgiveness, releasing criminals for good behavior, divorce, and so on. Measures like these would remain relatively the same with a culture focused on R-relations. In fact, it seems that the only commitments we are expected to adhere to are paying back student loans and child support, and as education stays with us for a lifetime and children are related by something other than R-relations, even these oddities fit with the theory. There are also benefits to seeing oneself as a person-stage, aside from Parfit's solace in his eventual death. For example, it seems that it would be easier to get over a trauma if one thinks that it happened to someone from whom they have become distant. Similarly, it would be easier to forgive oneself for something they did wrong in

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high school, because they are not entirely that person any more. If one has developed to the point where one realizes that the action was wrong, then they have some degree of separation from the person who felt that the action was justifiable.

If one has accepted Wolf's conclusion that the metaphysics has no bearing on the normative issue, the argument for retaining the concept of personal identity depends solely on the beneficial or detrimental consequences on our everyday lives (1986, 713). Even if there is a link, though, there are ways to avoid disastrous consequences, by making a case that the present self benefits from concerning itself with the future. It may be argued that once these consequences are removed, the benefits are good enough to alleviate any remaining concerns. Parfit can still have a reason to care for a future self, regardless of how distantly it is connected to his present self, precisely because it is beneficial to the present self.

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