

PHIL 260: Ethics
Winter 2006; David O. Brink
Persons & Values
Handout #5: Reductionism and Rationality

An Outline

- DP is especially interested in three different conceptions of practical reason: the fully neutral Neutralism or Rational Benevolence, the fully relative Present-Aim theory, and the hybrid Egoism or Self-Interest theory, which is agent biased but temporally neutral.
- Part II contains several arguments against Egoism.
 - Egoism implies that it might be irrational to act on other-regarding moral sentiments if this is contrary to the agent's self-interest, whereas the Present Aim theory need not condemn such action. But the Present Aim theory can't explain why people who lack altruistic desires are irrational or those who happen to have them should retain them. By contrast, we could try to answer both questions by appeal to the agent's enlightened self-interest.
 - Other arguments attack egoism's temporal neutrality.
 - The structural complaint about hybrid structure.
 - The worry about our preference for past, if greater, pain.
 - The worry about the value of satisfying past desires.
 - The worry about temporal neutrality in the face of changing ideals.
 - The worry based on our asymmetrical attitudes toward death (postmortem nonexistence) and prenatal nonexistence.
- Part III claims that psychological reductionism provides independent arguments against egoism. DP's main focus here seems to be on egoism's temporal neutrality.
 - The appeal to metaphysical depth.
 - Metaphysical depth establishes nothing. Cf. materialists can be as concerned about pain as dualists.
 - The argument that concern should track connectedness, which (normally/often) diminishes over time, thereby justifying a discount rate.
 - Distinguish this discount rate from fraction prudence. Still egoism must deny both discount rates.
 - DP only concludes that discounting need not be irrational. While temporal neutrality must deny this weaker claim, the proper moral for DP to draw is the stronger one that discounting is (sometimes) rationally required and not simply not irrational.
 - This argument assumes that concern should track connectedness, not just continuity. It is only connectedness and not continuity that normally diminishes over time.
 - But psychological reductionism analyzes personal identity in terms of continuity, not connectedness, and must if it is to respond to Reid's transitivity worry.
 - It's true that DP argues that is relation R, rather than identity per se, that is the relations that matters (or has primary significance). But this conclusion was forced on us by duplication cases, which

showed that an intrinsic relation, such as continuity, can deliver identity only by the addition of an extrinsic non-branching condition. But then the difference between relation R and identity should just be the addition of a non-branching clause. Those considerations give us no reason to revise our understanding of relation R in terms of psychological continuity.

- DP suggests that even though it becomes harder to view gross imprudence as irrational, it becomes easier to see it as a case of other-regarding harm involving immorality, instead of irrationality.
 - Is DP suggesting that the shift from criticism as irrational to criticism as immoral involves no net change in our evaluation of gross imprudence? There could be a net change if, like Mill, we think it easier to justify interference with conduct to prevent conduct under the harm principle than under paternalism. For then it would be easier to justify interference with gross imprudence. However, DP may also think that reductionism undermines the strong self/other asymmetry on which Mill's doctrine depends.
 - Isn't imprudence itself a form of immorality, violating duties to oneself?
- Doesn't DP's defense of the discount rate imply that there's a problem justifying improvements in one's character from a prudential point of view (the greater the improvement, the less it preserves the relations that matter)? But surely self-improvement is one of the paradigms of prudential rationality.
- Doesn't DP's defense of the discount rate confuse parts with wholes? We can see how me-tomorrow is more connected with me-now than is me-in-twenty-years. But the question is what *I* should do, and these different periods in my life are all equally parts of my life.
- Though DP's critical focus in ch. 14 is on egoism's temporal neutrality. He also has the resources to challenge egoism's agent bias. Fission implies that concern should track psychological continuity, rather than identity. But fission involves interpersonal psychological continuity. Tom should be just as concerned for Dick and for Harry as he would be for himself (in non-branching circumstances). But this intrinsic concern for anyone to whom one is R-related seems to conflict with egoism's agent bias.
 - We could accept the claim that interpersonal continuity justifies concern and yet defend egoism by reformulating agent bias in terms of continuants (maximal R-related selves), rather than persons.
 - We could accept the claim that interpersonal continuity justifies concern and yet defend egoism by claiming that psychological continuity extends the agent's (the person's) interests, much as Plato claims that interpersonal love is the next best thing to immortality.