

PHIL 260: Ethics
Winter 2006; David O. Brink
Persons & Values
Handout #6: Reductionism and Morality

DP suggests that psychological reductionism should have various consequences for our moral views, many of which he regards as potentially quite revisionary. We need to ask what these consequences are, how revisionary they would be, and whether they are genuine consequences. We will focus more on some consequences than others.

- Abortion and Euthanasia. DP thinks that extreme positions against the taking of life at both the beginning and end of life only make sense if personal identity is always determinate, as the non-reductionist claims. He takes his own arguments for psychological reductionism and the potential indeterminacy of identity to justify a more permissive view about abortion and euthanasia.
- Responsibility and Punishment. In claiming that personal identity plays a forensic role in our thought, one thing Locke meant was that it was legitimate to punish P2 for P1's crime iff $P2 = P1$. This is a retributive claim about punishment. DP thinks that psychological reductionism challenges this Lockean claim.
 - In one way, DP is willing to *expand* responsibility and punishment beyond the Lockean constraint. For he seems to agree with Wiggins that "a malefactor could scarcely evade responsibility by contriving his own fission". Reductionism implies that neither Dick nor Harry is identical with Tom. Fission is a case of *interpersonal* psychological continuity. So if we may legitimately punish Dick and/or Harry for Tom's crime, this violates the letter of the Lockean constraint. We could, of course, reformulate the Lockean constraint in terms of continuity, rather than identity. There are also puzzles about how much to punish Dick and Harry for Tom's offenses. Should we punish each as much as we would have punished Tom, thus doubling the sentence, or do we divide Tom's punishment between Dick and Harry, punishing each half as much as we would have punished Tom?
 - However, DP mostly focuses on ways in which reductionism might seem to *contract* our views about responsibility and punishment. If connectedness often diminishes over time, then a person's distant future self may be more like a different self than previously thought. But then long-term punishments for youthful crime may become relevantly like punishing another for one's own crime. Here, DP seems to invoke something like the Lockean constraint to argue against long-term punishment.
 - How should retributivists respond? If they cannot punish as long, should retributivists punish more harshly, in order to keep punishment proportionate to the wrong done?
 - How revisionary is this claim? We do recognize statutes of limitation for many crimes. But this is not the same. (a) These statutes are indexed to time, not connectedness. Time would be a poor proxy for what allegedly matters, viz. connectedness. They should not apply to those who do not experience diminished connectedness over time. (b) These statutes are discontinuous. They do not reduce responsibility prior to the limitation,

and they eliminate it completely afterward. But connectedness will diminish in a continuous fashion.

- This argument for a responsibility discount rate, like the argument for an intrapersonal discount rate, presupposes that it is only connectedness that matters. But this assumption is questionable.
 - 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 revise our understanding of relation R in terms of psychological continuity.
- This argument for a responsibility discount rate, like the argument for an intrapersonal discount rate, also seems to confuse wholes and parts. We can see how me-tomorrow is more connected with me-now than is me-in-twenty-years. But the question is what *I* am responsible for and what punishment I deserve, and these different periods in my life are all equally parts of my life.
- Should DP make a more general case for *expanding* responsibility and punishment? We've seen he should claim that responsibility should presuppose continuity, rather than identity per se. But we've also seen that interpersonal psychological continuity is quite common, even if the sort of maximal interpersonal continuity of fission is not. But this opens up the possibility of holding people responsible for the crimes of another if they have influenced the deliberations of the criminal in significant and relevant ways.
 - How revisionary would this expansion of responsibility be? We already recognize crimes of conspiracy and aiding and abetting. Perhaps we should also allow for the possibility of holding parents responsible for the crimes of their children when they have provided pathological nurture that contributed to the commission of the crime. To some extent such considerations already play a potential role of mitigation at juvenile sentencing, but it would be a new development to hold parents criminally liable in this way. On the other hand, there are advocates of this sort of reform.
 - Does this sort of interpersonal responsibility violate the Lockean constraint? It might be claimed that in such cases, one person is not responsible for the actions of another, but rather for his own actions of harmful influence. This would not violate the Lockean constraint.
 - On the other hand, it's not clear that we can explain how A is responsible for influencing B in such a way as to lead or enable B to commit a crime

without holding A partly responsible for B's crime. [more thought needed here]

- Commitments. DP also suggests that the truth of psychological reductionism should lead us to question whether promises or advance directives can bind in perpetuity. The idea, supposedly illustrated in the Russian Nobleman example (327), is that if we replace identity with connectedness in the idea that we can only bind ourselves then we may conclude that we do not have the power to bind our distant future selves, at least if they are only weakly connected to the person doing the binding. This would be, in effect, like binding someone else, which we cannot do.
 - As before, DP's argument depends on the problematic assumption that it is connectedness, rather than continuity that matters.
 - As before, the argument may confuse parts and wholes, inasmuch it is persons that bind themselves, and my near and distant selves are equally parts of my life.
- DP focuses on how reductionism might *contract* our commitments or our ability to commit. But we might ask whether it could also *expand* our commitments or our ability to commit. For now we might conclude that we can not only commit ourselves but those with whom we are continuous. Why can't Tom commit Dick and/or Harry? If he can, why can't we commit other kinds of associates with whom we are interpersonally psychologically continuous? [more thought here too]
- Utilitarianism and Distributive Justice. DP thinks that psychological reductionism makes utilitarianism more plausible than it would otherwise be, because it affords utilitarianism a reply to the charge that it ignores the separateness of persons.
 - Utilitarianism takes everyone's interests into account by aggregating their interests, balancing benefits to some against harms to others, so as to produce the best *total* outcome. It effects a kind of neutrality across lives akin to the temporal neutrality that prudence effects within lives. But whereas balancing goods and harms may be acceptable *within a life*, many think that it is not acceptable to do so *across lives*. They claim that utilitarianism ignores the separateness of persons. For instance, Rawls writes
 - This view of social cooperation [utilitarianism's] is the consequence of extending to society the principle of choice for one man, and then, to make this extension work, conflating all persons into one Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons [TJ 27; cf. 29, 187-8].
 - Why do Rawls and others accept intrapersonal balancing, required by prudence, but reject interpersonal balancing, required by utilitarianism? The answer requires appeal to *compensation*. In the case of intrapersonal balancing, benefactor and beneficiary are the same. So sacrifice is automatically compensated. By contrast, in the case of interpersonal balancing, benefactor and beneficiary are different people. So interpersonal compensation for sacrifice is problematic. As Nozick explains,
 - Individually, we each sometimes choose to undergo some pain or sacrifice for a greater benefit or to avoid a greater harm Why not, similarly, hold that some persons have to bear some costs that benefit other persons more? But there is no social entity with a good that undergoes some sacrifice for its own good. ... To use a person in this way does not sufficiently respect and take account of the fact that he is a separate person, that his is the only

life he has. He does not get some overbalancing good from his sacrifice, and no one is entitled to force this upon him ... [Anarchy, State, and Utopia 32-3].

- So a principle requiring compensation for sacrifice explains the differential treatment of intrapersonal and interpersonal balancing.
- We could reject this compensation principle outright, as implausibly preventing us from taxing the super-rich to provide basic sustenance to the infirm. But DP claims that reductionism provides a different response. He thinks that reductionism undermines the separateness of persons on which the distributive objection to utilitarianism depends.
- To the extent that DP is merely appealing, again, to claims about metaphysical depth, his argument is, again, unconvincing. But DP can and does say more. He thinks that the truth of reductionism should lead us to two different reactions: (a) to assimilate the intrapersonal to the interpersonal (the glue holding together my own life is not so different from the glue holding together different lives), and (b) to assimilate the interpersonal to the intrapersonal (the glue holding together different lives is not so different from the glue holding together a single life). The first reaction supports *expanding the scope* of distributional principles from interpersonal contexts into intrapersonal ones. By itself, this is no help to utilitarianism, which is distributionally insensitive. However, DP thinks that the second reaction supports *reducing the weight* of distributional principles. The net effect, DP concludes, is to make utilitarianism more plausible than it would otherwise be.
- It seems the only way this would defend utilitarianism is if we reduced the weight of distributional principles to zero. But why should we do this? We're not claiming that the interpersonal case is exactly like the intrapersonal case, except perhaps in the special case of fission.
- DP could claim that reductionism should lead us to reformulate the compensation principle in a way that presupposes continuity, rather than identity. Even if interpersonal compensation is impossible (not automatic), q-compensation is possible (automatic).
- But q-compensation is surely a function not simply of the magnitude of the benefit conferred but also of the degree of continuity or connectedness between the benefactor and beneficiary. But we are differentially connected to others. If so, reductionism would seem to support not utilitarianism but an agent-biased theory such as self-referential altruism. But that means that reductionism supports, rather than revises, commonsense morality, contrary to DP's claim (cf. Jeske, "Persons, Compensation, and Utilitarianism").