

PHIL 260: Ethics
Winter 2006; David O. Brink
Persons & Values
Paper #1

Remember, students taking the seminar for credit are to write two papers for the course: one short paper, approximately 6-8 pages, and one longer paper in two drafts, with the revision being approximately 14-16 pages. I'm assuming that most students will write their shorter paper first, and my directions reflect this assumption. But students can choose to do their long paper first, submitting their draft at the time the first paper is due. I've listed below some paper topics that should be suitable for the first paper. With a little expansion, many of them could serve as topics for a longer paper. Students are welcome to design their own topic instead, but must okay their topic with me in advance. The paper is due in class on Thursday, February 9.

1. What is Locke's theory of personal identity, and why does he think that a person is identical neither with a material substance nor with an immaterial substance?
2. Both Butler and Reid are non-reductionists who criticize Locke's conception of personal identity. Examine and assess at least one and no more than two of their objections to the Lockean theory. Do the objections apply just to Locke's theory or to other versions of reductionism as well? Does the Lockean have resources with which to defend or modify his theory? If so, how, if at all, does introduction of these resources transform the Lockean theory?
3. In "The Self and the Future" Williams argues that a Psychological Spectrum undermines psychological reductionism, whereas Parfit thinks that such Spectra support reductionism. Explain their disagreement and defend your own view.
4. Williams thinks that fission and other cases of psychological branching undermine psychological reductionism, whereas Parfit thinks they support reductionism. Explain their disagreement and defend your own view.
5. In ch. 14 of Reasons and Persons Parfit claims that the truth of psychological reductionism undermines egoism's temporal neutrality and requires (or at least permits) a discount rate of rational concern. What is the discount rate, how, if at all, is it incompatible with temporal neutrality, and does reductionism require such a discount rate?
6. Parfit claims that psychological reductionism implies that we can no longer criticize "short-sighted" behavior (e.g. cigarette smoking or a disposition to party, rather than study) as imprudent. However, he thinks that this behavior becomes morally criticizable (RP 318-20). What does he mean? Would such a shift in our views be significant and, if so, why? Is Parfit right that reductionism requires this shift in our views?
7. In ch. 15 of Reasons and Persons Parfit also claims that psychological reductionism should affect our attitudes toward moral responsibility and distributive justice. He thinks that reductionism makes it harder for us to hold people responsible for the actions of their earlier selves and to impose long-term punishments for crimes. He also thinks that reductionism undermines the separateness of persons, reduces the importance of distributional principles, and makes utilitarianism more plausible than it would otherwise be. Pick one of these two issues (moral responsibility or distributive justice). Explain Parfit's claims. Does reductionism support these revisionary moral claims, and are they as revisionary as Parfit thinks?

8. What is the relationship between personal identity and special concern for one's future? Does special concern presuppose personal identity, or should special concern help us figure out the nature of personal identity? How, if at all, might our understanding of special concern be affected by the acceptance of psychological reductionism? In this connection, you might want to discuss John Perry's claims in his article "The Importance of Being Identical".

9. Suppose we think that it is psychological continuity, rather than personal identity per se, that is the relationship that matters (has primary significance). How does this tend to show that I have reason to be concerned for others, as well as myself? If my reasons for concern track continuity, rather than identity, does this undermine an egoistic conception of rationality? Why or why not?