

PHIL 260: Ethics
Winter 2006: Persons & Values
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Syllabus: Topics and Readings

This is probably an overly ambitious Syllabus for a ten week seminar. I regard the early part of the Syllabus (roughly, §§1-9) as pretty fixed. We may have to choose among the later topics (§§10-12), and I welcome student input on these decisions. Required readings are preceded by `(A)`; recommended readings are preceded by `(B)`. Full references are available on the Select Bibliography. Most of the required readings come from the required texts. Required readings not found in the required texts, and some recommended readings, can be found on Electronic Reserves. If you have trouble locating any of the recommended readings, let me know; I can try to help.

I. PERSONS AND THEIR PERSISTENCE

What is it to be a person, and how does this matter for morality or practical reason? What is it to be a particular person, who persists through time, and how does this matter for morality and practical reason?

1. Persons. What is distinctive of persons? What makes them an important category of thing, and how do persons differ from non-human animals? Locke said that the concept of a person is a "forensic" concept, by which he meant that persons are the bearers of rights and responsibilities. If so, perhaps we need to distinguish persons from human beings as well. What features allow an organism to be a bearer of rights and responsibilities?

(A) Locke, in Perry, Personal Identity.

(B) Green, Prolegomena to Ethics, book II; Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person".

2. Personal Identity: Preliminaries. What is it for one person to persist through time -- that is, for persons at different times to be one and the same? Why do we need a theory of personal identity? It will help to distinguish (a) among numeric, qualitative, and compositional identity, and (b) between epistemic and metaphysical criteria of identity. We expect persons to survive some physical and psychological changes, but not others. Why is this? How is a person's persistence connected to her physical and psychological characteristics? Here we will meet the main alternative theories, viz. reductionism (e.g. physical and psychological reductionism) and nonreductionism. How, if at all, is our view of these alternatives affected by a commitment to philosophical naturalism?

(A) Parfit, Reasons and Persons, ch. 10.

(B) Noonan, Personal Identity, ch. 1.

3. Locke and his Critics. Locke's memory theory is a version of Reductionism. What does it say? Butler, Reid, and Hume present important objections to Locke's theory, which raise quite general issues for reductionism. Reid notices that Locke's memory criterion is not transitive. Why is this a problem? Reid also thinks the reductionist cannot account for the fact that persons are subjects of experiences. Why does he think this? Butler claims that Locke's theory is circular. Is it? Butler, Reid, and Hume all think that reductionism cannot recognize personal identity through time, in a "strict and philosophical" sense. Why is this? Are Butler's and Reid's nonreductionist

reactions and Hume's skeptical reaction equally plausible? We will look at reductionist resources to respond to these and other worries. In what ways does the development of these resources transform reductionism?

(A) Locke in Perry, Personal Identity; Butler, Reid, and Hume in Perry, Personal Identity; Parfit, Reasons and Persons, §§78, 80-1.

(B) Noonan, Personal Identity, chs. 2-4; Shoemaker, "Persons and their Pasts" in Identity, Cause, and Mind and "Personal Identity: A Materialist's Account," §§1-5, in Shoemaker and Swinburne, Personal Identity; Grice, "Personal Identity" in Perry, Personal Identity; and Rovane, The Bounds of Agency, chs. 1-2.

4. Parfit and Psychological Reductionism. Parfit mounts an imaginative and vigorous defense of a form of psychological reductionism against nonreductionism and reductionist rivals. What is the "combined spectra" argument, and how does it support psychological reductionism?

(A) Williams, "The Self and the Future" in Perry, Personal Identity; Parfit, Reasons and Persons, ch. 11.

(B) Noonan, Personal Identity, chs. 5-11; Shoemaker, "Personal Identity: A Materialist's Account".

5. Parfit and What Matters. Parfit claims that fission cases (in which people divide) demonstrate that it is psychological continuity, rather than personal identity as such, that matters to us. When continuity and uniqueness come apart, does continuity have significant independent value? If so, is it only continuity that matters, or does uniqueness have some intrinsic significance of its own? Is it clear what matters most? Does psychological reductionism accommodate our intuitions about all duplication cases, including so-called branch-line cases?

(A) Williams, "The Self and the Future" and Parfit, Reasons and Persons, chs. 12-13.

(B) Nagel, "Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness" in Perry, Personal Identity; Lewis, "Survival and Identity" in Rorty, The Identities of Persons; Sosa, "Surviving Matters".

6. Loose Ends and Rival Views. Does psychological reductionism about personal identity require reductionism about persons? What should the psychological reductionist say about the first-person perspective? Are the arguments for psychological reductionism compelling, or should the reductionist be a physical reductionist?

(B) Shoemaker, "Parfit on Identity" in Reading Parfit; McDowell, "Reductionism and the First Person" in Reading Parfit; Rovane, The Bounds of Agency, ch. 6; Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Reply to Parfit"; Johnston, "Human Beings"; Thomson, "People and Their Bodies" in Reading Parfit; Parfit, "Experiences, Subjects, and Conceptual Schemes" and The Metaphysics of the Self.

II THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONS

Here we focus on the normative consequences, if any, of different conceptions of persons and personal identity, giving significant attention to Parfit's revisionary normative conclusions.

7. Reductionism and Special Concern. Private projects (e.g. that I complete the book I am writing or that I educate my son properly) are central to our lives and may seem to be ingredients in psychological continuity. Yet they also seem to presuppose personal identity. Are these two

aspects of private projects consistent? What is the justification of private projects, and how does our answer affect our views about what matters?

(A) Perry, "The Importance of Being Identical" in Rorty, The Identities of Persons.

(B) Parfit, Reasons and Persons, ch. 13; Whiting, "Friends and Future Selves" and "Impersonal Friends"; Broad, "Self and Others"; and Brink, "Eudaimonism, Love and Friendship, and Political Community".

8. Reductionism and Prudence. In Reasons and Persons Parfit offers various arguments against rational egoism or prudence, some of which rest on his reductionist claims about personal identity. One argument does not. Parfit notices that rational egoism has a hybrid structure; its attitude toward the distribution of goods is temporally-neutral but person-relative. Parfit thinks that this hybrid structure is unjustified and endorses the fully relative present-aim theory. Is Parfit right to insist on the parity of interpersonal and intertemporal distribution? How might the egoist appeal to the separateness of persons to defend her hybrid theory? Any defense of egoism that appeals to the separateness of persons must address Parfit's claims that reductionism undermines the separateness of persons. Egoism's temporal neutrality implies that it is rationally required for a person to make a sacrifice now for her own greater future good (now-for-then sacrifice). Parfit thinks that reductionism challenges the rationality of now-for-then sacrifice. One reason he offers is that personal identity is metaphysically "less deep," according to the reductionist. Parfit also appeals to the fact that psychological connectedness depreciates over time. Are these arguments against egoism's temporal neutrality compelling? Do fission cases pose any problem for the agent bias that rational egoism displays?

(A) Parfit, Reasons and Persons, chs. 7 and 14; Brink, "Rational Egoism and the Separateness of Persons" in Reading Parfit.

(B) Butler in Perry, Personal Identity; Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics, pp. 418-19; Nagel, The Possibility of Altruism; Johnston, "Human Concerns without Superlative Selves" in Reading Parfit.

9. Reductionism, Responsibility, and Distributive Justice. Parfit also claims that 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. Does reductionism support these revisionary moral claims, and are they as revisionary as Parfit thinks?

(A) Parfit, Reasons and Persons, ch. 15.

(B) Rawls, A Theory of Justice, §§5-6; Butler in Perry, Personal Identity; and Jeske, "Persons, Compensation, and Utilitarianism".

10. Persons, Personal Identity, and the Good. Subjective conceptions of happiness measure a person's good by her level of pleasure or by the extent to which her desires are satisfied. By contrast, objective (e.g. perfectionist) conceptions of happiness measure someone's welfare by the development and exercise of her capacities and the kinds of activities in which she is engaged. How should we decide among various conceptions of the good. A traditional approach to questions about the good appeals to conceptions of human nature. How, if at all, should our view about the good be affected by our conceptions of persons and personal identity over time? In

particular, how is our view about the good affected by a conception of persons as essentially deliberative beings and a conception of personal identity in terms of reasoned control and modification of intentional states, such as beliefs, desires, and goals (psychological continuity, under one interpretation)? We will tackle these issues, in part, by looking at Aristotle's account of eudaimonia and his appeal to the human function.

(A) Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics (EN) i, x 6-8.

(B) Aristotle, Physics ii; De Anima i 1, ii 1-5; Irwin, Aristotle's First Principles, ch. 16; Kraut, "Two Conceptions of Happiness"; Nagel, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia"; Green, Prolegomena to Ethics, books II and III.

11. Self and Others. There is interpersonal, as well as intrapersonal, psychological continuity. This seems to imply that the separateness of persons -- the difference between intrapersonal and interpersonal relations -- is a matter of degree, rather than kind. What, if anything, does this imply about the distinction between self and others and the rationality of concern for others? We will explore these issues by examining and assessing Aristotle's discussion of friendship as a relationship between "other selves".

(A) Aristotle, EN viii-ix, esp. ix 4-12; Brink, "Self-love and Altruism".

(B) Plato, Symposium 210-12, Phaedrus 230-34, 237-57; Irwin, Plato's Ethics, ch. 18; Vlastos, "The Individual as Object of Love in Plato" in Platonic Studies; Irwin, Aristotle's First Principles, ch. 18; Broad, "Self and Others"; Whiting, "Impersonal Friends"; and Brink, "Eudaimonism, Love and Friendship, and Political Community".

12. The Separateness of Persons and Moral Theory. Williams and others think that utilitarianism is too demanding of agents and ignores the separateness of persons. Scheffler argues that if we are to integrate moral theory into a reasonable human psychology, we must reject utilitarianism and other aggressively impartial moral theories in favor of moral theories that are more moderate in their demands. Do impartial moral theories fail to account for the separateness of persons, and does Scheffler's own moderate moral theory represent a reasonable way to integrate moral theory and moral psychology?

(A) Scheffler, Human Morality, esp. chs. 2-3, 6-7.

(B) Brink, "A Reasonable Morality"; Scheffler, The Rejection of Consequentialism; Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism" and "Persons, Character, and Morality".