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# An Interview with Derek Parfit

Derek Parfit is a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, and author of the controversial and widely acclaimed book *Reasons and Persons*.



Derek Parfit

**Cogito:** We usually start these interviews by asking our interviewees something about what turned their interests towards philosophy. Was there some particular person, or problem, or work, that made you a philosopher?

**Parfit:** Yes, there was. As an undergraduate, I did only modern history. Then I read David Wiggins's book, *Identity and Spatiotemporal Continuity*, and in particular his discussion of the actual cases in which the hemispheres of people's brains have been disconnected, in attempts to treat epilepsy. As a result, these people seem to have two

quite separate streams of thoughts and experiences, in having each of which they are unaware of the other. Wiggins then imagined a case in which the two halves of our brain would be successfully transplanted into a pair of empty skulls, and there would later be two people each of whom has half our brain and is fully psychologically continuous with us. Since these would be two different people, it can't be true that each of them *is* us. So how should we regard our relation to these people? I found that a fascinating question. It was this imagined case that drew me into philosophy.

**Cogito:** It is, of course, for your views on personal identity that you are best known in the philosophical world. But personal identity is only one area—and by no means the simplest, where metaphysical conceptions of reality have been thought to be practically important. Do you have a general view about the nature of the relation between metaphysics, on the one hand, and practical reason, on the other?

**Parfit:** Yes. What interests me most are those metaphysical questions whose answers seem to be relevant—or to make a difference—to what we have reason to care about and to do, and to our moral beliefs. Personal identity is one such subject; two others are freewill and time's passage. Free will is the most straightforward. Many people have argued that, if determinism is true, no one can deserve to be punished, and what Strawson calls our 'reactive attitudes'—such as resentment, indignation, or gratitude—would be unjustified. I believe that, in this and some other cases, metaphysics should affect our attitudes and acts.

**Cogito:** So you're not impressed with the view, usually ascribed to Hume, that we can care about anything—that caring is not constrained by the facts? On this view, even if time isn't really passing, or no one has free will, that need make no difference at all to what we should care about.

**Parfit:** No, I reject that view. It has become the dominant view in much of philosophy and economics. On this view, while we can have reasons for *acting*, and our acts can be irrational, we can't have reasons for *caring*, except of a derivative kind, and our desires can't be in themselves irrational. If that were true, metaphysics couldn't have the significance that I think it has. But I see no reason to accept this view. On this view, what we have reason to do is what would get us what we want. But most good reasons for acting are not given, I believe, by our desires. They are given by our reasons for having these desires. I have the old-fashioned view that there can be straightforward truths about what we have reason to want. To defend that view, it's better to start not with ethics, but with simpler and less controversial reasons. Mackie claimed that 'objectively prescriptive values' were too queer to be part of the fabric of the Universe. But our ordinary reasons for caring and acting don't seem too queer. If we believe that there can't be such reasons, we ought to conclude that there can't be reasons for believing either, and then we might as well give up both philosophy and science.

**Cogito:** But presumably the queerness is not in the reasons for acting; the queerness is in the idea that the reasons for acting are connected with the metaphysical nature of the world, by some direct means that doesn't involve any dependence on what we happen to care about.

**Parfit:** There isn't a sharp distinction between metaphysical and ordinary facts. Both kinds of fact are involved in one of the questions that interests me most: that of the rationality of our attitudes to time. One such attitude is what I've called the *bias towards the near*: caring more about the near future than about the distant future. This attitude is most pronounced when we're considering events that are good or bad to experience, or live through. Pain provides the clearest case. Since we care more about the near future, we sometimes choose to postpone some ordeal, knowing that this postponement will only make the ordeal worse. In such cases, I would claim, the fact that our ordeal will be worse is a reason for *not* postponing it, and the fact that it will be further in the future is *no* reason for postponing it. That it will be further in the

future won't make it, at the time, any less painful, or any less ours.

Our bias towards the near can, I think, be usefully compared with a purely imaginary attitude to time. I described someone who has what I called *Future Tuesday Indifference*. This person cares equally about his whole future, except that he doesn't care at all about what will happen to him on future Tuesdays. So, if he had to choose whether to have a mild pain on either Monday or Wednesday of next week, or great agony on Tuesday, he would choose the agony on Tuesday. Here again, I would say, the fact that the agony will be much worse is a reason for *not* preferring it, and the fact that it will be on Tuesday is no reason for preferring it. This attitude would be quite irrational. Some people think this attitude too crazy to be worth discussing. But it's like our bias towards the near, except that it's more obviously arbitrary. I also imagined an intermediate case: caring more about the next year.

In these examples, the fact that some pain will be more painful isn't a metaphysical fact, nor are the facts that some pain will be on a Tuesday, or further in the future. But some of our attitudes to time do rest on facts that involve metaphysics. One is what I called our *bias towards the future*. This applies to events that are good or bad to experience, or live through. We care more about these events when they are in the future rather than the past. And this distinction raises deep philosophical questions. On one view about time, the property of being present, or occurring now, is an objective feature of reality, and time's passage is the movement of that feature into the future. This is the view that can seem to justify our bias towards the future. On another view, which I'm inclined to accept, 'now' is no more objective than 'I' or 'here', time's passage is a myth, and there is less metaphysical difference between the past and the future. That supports the attitude of caring equally about good or bad experiences, whether they are in the future or the past.

**Cogito:** But isn't our bias towards the future so deep-seated that no metaphysical reasoning could ever dispel it?

**Parfit:** There are two ways in which metaphysics can affect our attitudes. First, it may only change our beliefs about whether our

attitudes are justified, or what we have reasons to care about. Second, it may also change our attitudes, or desires. On the first, more pessimistic view, we are just lumbered with certain attitudes. We may come to see that these attitudes are irrational, but that will do nothing to get rid of them. But even this might make a practical difference. Suppose, for example, that thinking about free will won't enable us to get rid of reactive attitudes like anger. There's still a difference between anger which we regard as irrational, and *resentment*, since the latter includes the belief that the person we want to make suffer *deserves* to suffer. If we come to believe this attitude to be unjustified, that may make a difference to what we do.

It's less easy to say how the metaphysics of personal identity should affect our view about what we have reason to care about and do. The implications here take longer to describe. But there is one well-known example. One central claim of early Buddhism was that most of our suffering arises from a false belief in the self. The remedy was the 'no self view', according to which there aren't really any selves or persons. But it

was also claimed that the no self view was very hard to believe. One main aim of Buddhist monks, when they meditate, is to try fully to internalize the truth of this view, so that it can affect their attitudes and emotions.

**Cogito:** Can I ask you about another of Mackie's points? When Mackie doubted that there could be objectively prescriptive values, part of what he doubted was that there could be facts about values, or about reasons, which it would be impossible to recognize without being moved to act.

**Parfit:** It might be puzzling if beliefs about reasons could necessarily motivate us. That's one of Hume's main arguments: moral beliefs necessarily motivate, but mere beliefs can't do that, so moral beliefs must really be a kind of desire. But I would reject that argument's first premise. Beliefs about reasons do not, I think, necessarily motivate.

**Cogito:** But presumably you think that such beliefs *could* motivate us, and that they would then provide the explanation of why we act. Isn't that what Mackie finds puzzling? If reasons are facts about the world, how could such facts bring it about that we act in some particular way?

**Parfit:** It wouldn't be the fact itself, but only our belief in this fact. Those who hold my kind of view—or what are called 'Externalists'—might claim at this point that most of us have a standing desire to do what we believe that we have reason to do. That could be how, if we believe we have a reason, that belief together with that desire leads us to act. This reply accepts the Humean account, according to which we cannot act without some desire. That account can be challenged, but Externalists don't need to challenge it. According to Ross for example, if I remember right, most people have some desire to do their duty, but we could know that something was our duty even if we completely lacked that desire.

I've not tried to reach a view about the Humean account, because it seems irrelevant to the questions with which I'm concerned. If I was persuaded that we couldn't believe that we had some reason unless we had some corresponding desire, I would



*Were the Buddhists right about personal identity?*

have to consider this issue. But I'm persuaded by an example of Christine Korsgaard's: that of someone who is so depressed that she just doesn't care about anything. Such a person could still believe that she had a reason to act in some way, because she will later regret it if she doesn't. If she lacks all motivation, we don't have to conclude that she can't have that belief.

**Cogito:** When you mentioned the Buddhists, I wondered if you might say something like this. Perhaps the difficulty of coming to act on a reason that is given you by the metaphysical facts is the same as the difficulty of coming to believe in the metaphysical facts in the first place. So what the Buddhists are doing is acquiring the belief, and, through that, the motivation.

**Parfit:** In some cases, such a claim may be true; but I don't think it's always true. If we take free will, which may be the clearest case, many people have not found it difficult to believe in determinism. Many, indeed, have found it difficult to believe that determinism could be false. If they conclude that the truth of determinism undermines desert, the effect on their attitudes can be more straightforward. They can still have the strong conviction that what some criminal has done is a terrible thing. And, as I've said, they may still feel anger. But they won't endorse ill-will towards the criminal. They won't think either that it would be good if the criminal suffered, or that it matters less if the criminal suffers than if some innocent person suffers.

**Cogito:** So the metaphysics might have an effect on our 'second-order attitudes', i.e. our attitudes towards our own first-order attitudes, and this second-order difference might in turn have an influence on our behaviour? We might come to regard our anger, perhaps, as merely a pathological reaction, and seek therapy for ourselves rather than demanding punishment for the criminal?

**Parfit:** Yes; and I think it's also likely that this would make our anger less intense and less lasting. We all have these natural reactions, but if we don't endorse them that helps to overcome them. I'm helped in this area by the fact that I get angry with material objects all the time. I sometimes want to kick my car, for example. Since I have this anger at material objects, which is manifestly ir-

rational, it's easier to me to think, when I get angry with people, that this is also irrational.



*An obviously irrational act. But is it any more rational to get angry at other people?*

**Cogito:** I was surprised to hear you say that many people find it easy to believe in determinism. Didn't Kant claim that, at the moment when we are actually making a decision, we necessarily act 'under the idea of freedom'? Isn't that an essential aspect of facing up to a decision?

**Parfit:** Some people have thought that that we can't, at the time of making a decision, believe in determinism. Others, of whom I'm one, see no tension here. When I consider what it's like to make a decision, I don't think I am presupposing the falsity of determinism.

I would now distinguish two ways in which metaphysics can make a difference. In the clearest cases, there is one intelligible metaphysical view whose truth would justify some attitude or moral belief of ours, and another metaphysical view whose truth would show that our attitude is unjustified. In such cases, whether the attitude is justified depends on which metaphysical view is true.

Some cases are more complicated. Thus, in the case of free will and time's passage, there is one metaphysical view whose truth would undermine some of our attitudes. If determinism is true, there can be no desert; and, if time's passage is an illusion, we cannot justify our bias towards the future. In both cases, there are other metaphysical views whose truth might *seem* to justify our

attitudes. But I'm inclined to believe that this is not so. I agree with those who think that, even if determinism is false, there could be no basis for desert. And I doubt whether, even if time's passage were not an illusion, we could justify our bias towards the future. In such cases, it may seem that metaphysics *doesn't* make a difference, since the justifiability of our attitudes doesn't depend on which metaphysical view is true.

Mark Johnston defends a view that is sharply opposed to mine. On his view, which he calls 'Minimalism', metaphysics is always irrelevant to our practical concerns. It would support that view if we decided that, whichever metaphysical view is true, our attitudes or moral beliefs *are* justified. But, in the cases I've just mentioned, my conclusion is that our attitudes *aren't* justified. And that means that, in a different way, metaphysics still makes a difference. The justifiability of these attitudes may not depend on *which* metaphysical view is true. But we need to think about metaphysics to see that, on any of the possible views, these attitudes are not justified.

**Cogito:** Can we return to the cases in which, on one metaphysical view, our attitudes are justified, but, on another view, they are not? In such cases, some people might say, our views about metaphysics are likely to depend on our views about ethics, rather than vice versa.

**Parfit:** Some people have said this; but I think that in some cases this clearly gets things the wrong way round. Suppose someone argued, 'We can deserve punishment for what we do; but we couldn't deserve punishment if determinism were true; therefore determinism is not true'. As it stands, this argument seems to me useless, since it's hard to see how we could be sure that we did deserve punishment for our crimes if we thought that this could not be true unless determinism were false, and we weren't sure that determinism was false. We might add an extra premise to the argument. We might believe that God treats us as deserving punishment for our crimes, and that God wouldn't treat us unjustly. Then we would have a useful argument against determinism. But it would now be another metaphysical premise, about the existence and nature of God, which which would give us

reason to accept the metaphysical conclusion. At the moment I'm inclined to doubt whether it's ever the case that we can believe both that some moral belief presupposes some metaphysical belief, and that the metaphysical belief must be true because the moral belief is true.

**Cogito:** That suggests that you think that, as a general rule, the grounds of metaphysical arguments provide a better or firmer basis than the sorts of attitude that lead people to hold the moral convictions that they do.

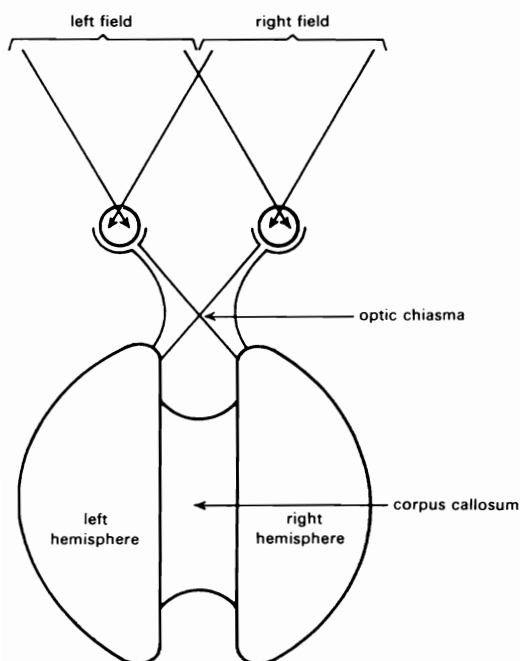
**Parfit:** That isn't quite it. My view is rather that, when our moral beliefs appeal to certain facts, they *rest* on those facts. Since that's so, we can't decide whether those facts obtain by appealing to those beliefs. That isn't exactly wishful thinking, but it involves the same kind of mistake.

**Cogito:** Yes, but what we've got to compare are the grounds for our beliefs in metaphysical facts on the one side against the grounds for acceptance of ethical convictions on the other. For what you're saying, you need to be convinced that the grounds for metaphysical views are of a sort that gives them greater strength than the grounds for our ethical attitudes can give to those attitudes.

**Parfit:** Not quite, because I agree that there may be areas where, as Johnston claims, metaphysics is irrelevant. In such cases, perhaps, we can be confident of our moral beliefs, and justifiably confident that these beliefs cannot be threatened by metaphysics. All I was saying was that we couldn't usefully argue both that our moral belief requires some metaphysical view to be true, and that, since our moral belief is true, the metaphysical view must be true.

**Cogito:** Perhaps we ought to shift, at this point, and discuss in a little more detail your views about personal identity. How did you come to take such a special interest in this particular subject?

**Parfit:** It's not hard to explain that interest. It's easy to be specially concerned about our own continued existence over time. But perhaps I could say this. Consider Wiggins's imagined case, in which my brain will be divided, and each half will be successfully transplanted into the empty skull of some other body. And suppose we agree, as most people would, that there are two resulting people. If that is so, these two people can't



Severing the corpus callosum separates the two hemispheres of the brain, and seems to create two distinct centres of consciousness.

each be one and the same person, *me*. And, since there's no reason to believe that I would be one of these people, we ought to conclude that I would be neither of these people, and that I would therefore cease to exist. This case seemed to me to show that what we have reason to care about, in caring about our future, isn't that we ourselves should continue to exist. If we were about to divide, in this way, we should conclude that our relation to each of the resulting people, though it wouldn't be personal identity, would contain everything that matters in our ordinary survival. If that is so, it seemed to me, our reason to be specially concerned about our future can't be, as we assume, that this will be *our* future. Personal identity is not what matters. But that's very hard to believe.

**Cogito:** It might help some of our readers if you could relate your view to the famous discussion of personal identity in Locke's *Essay*. Locke argued for psychological continuity as the real *criterion* of personal identity, or as what makes us one and the same person over time. I suppose you would say

that his theory can't adequately handle cases of division?

**Parfit:** Locke does mention a case of division, though it involves, curiously, the continuity of consciousness in a severed toe. I like to think that Locke could have been won over to the view that what matters is not identity but psychological continuity. Because he thought that both of these mattered, he was led to claim that if we are conscious of some past act, it must have been us who did that act, and if we cannot remember it, we can't have done it. That can't be right.

**Cogito:** It's central to your view that what we should care about is not personal identity. So it's puzzling that you nonetheless spend a great deal of time discussing identity and rather less time on those things that, on your view, we should care about.

**Parfit:** The main reason for that is that it's so hard to believe that identity—or our own continued existence—*isn't* what matters. Another related point is the following. It seems to me well worth considering the bizarre problem cases that Locke introduced, and that still dominate the literature. By considering these cases, we discover that we are deeply inclined to hold certain beliefs about ourselves, and our identity. If we imagine that we are about to undergo one of these bizarre operations, we may not know what we should expect to happen: whether, for example, we should expect ever to wake up again. But, if we ask, 'Will the person who wakes up be me?', it can seem that this question must have an answer, which must be either yes or no. We take our continued existence to be a kind of fact that must be determinate, and all-or-nothing. If someone will later be in pain, we assume, that person must either *be*, or *not be*, us.

That assumption could only be true, I believe, on something like a Cartesian view. On such a view, we either have or are persisting, indivisible immaterial entities—souls, or pure egos—whose identities must be determinate. I'm not claiming that most of us accept that kind of view. Most of us, nowadays, reject such views. But we continue to think about our identity in a way that could only be justified if some such view were true. In order to come to see that identity isn't what matters, we need to be shown that we continue to think in that way—that we believe that our own contin-

ued existence does have this very special character. That belief, I think, underlies our view that identity must be what matters.

**Cogito:** It's now ten years since the appearance of *Reasons and Persons*. How have your views about personal identity changed in the intervening decade?

**Parfit:** The main change is the following. In my book I was inconsistent in my attitude to the criteria of personal identity. In the first printing, I argued in favour of a purely psychological criterion. I now think that it's a mistake to spend much time discussing the choice between the different criteria. What's more important is to see that, when these criteria conflict, questions about our identity are what I call *empty*. Even without answering these questions, we could know the full truth about what was going to happen. And I now think that, even in ordinary cases, where questions about our identity *have* answers, these questions are, in a way, empty. If we know all the facts about physical and psychological continuity, we know what's going to happen. Questions about our identity are merely questions about how we can redescribe what's going to happen. They are, in a sense, merely conceptual questions.

**Cogito:** If these questions are 'merely' conceptual, does it follow that the answers can't provide reasons for having some particular attitude or other?

**Parfit:** That doesn't strictly follow, but I think it's true. Let me give another example, to illustrate the difference between questions about reality and conceptual questions. Suppose I learn that my brother's plane has crashed. I ask, 'Is he still alive?' This might be a question about reality, since I may have no idea whether my brother is quite all right, or has been blown to pieces. Suppose next that I learn that my brother is in hospital, and that because of damage to his brain he is irreversibly unconscious. His heart is still beating, and his other organs are still functioning, but that is only because he is attached to some machine. Once again, I ask, 'Is my brother still alive?' But that is now a question of a quite different kind. I know what state my brother is in. My question is no longer about two different possibilities, either of which might be true. It is only about how we can re-classify my

brother's state, or about our concept of being alive.

Suppose that, given our use of that concept, there is no doubt that someone whose heart is still beating, and whose other organs are still functioning, is still alive. The fact that this person's heart is beating doesn't *cause* it to be true that this person is still alive. The relation between these facts is closer than that. In such a case, that's *what it is* for this person to be still alive. Many people assume that, if such a person is still alive, it must be wrong to stop his heart from beating, since we would then be killing him. On my view, if we decide that, in itself, it is morally unimportant that this person's heart is still beating, we should conclude that it's unimportant that he is still alive. That's because, in the sense I've sketched, that is a conceptual fact. Concepts like 'alive' and 'kill' have, we assume, great rational and moral significance. But, on my view, it doesn't matter *that* such a concept applies. What matters is *why* it applies. In this imagined case, even if my brother is still alive, he is irreversibly unconscious. If his being still alive just consists in the fact that his heart is still beating, it is not morally significant that he is still alive. Nor is it significant that, if we stopped his heart from beating, we would be killing him. If that's what he would have wanted, that is what we should do.

**Cogito:** The philosophical literature on personal identity often sounds, to the outside, like a wild excursus into science fiction. You have played your part in this trend. Recently, however, there has been a reaction in the literature against the use of bizarre thought-experiments. Kathy Wilkes, for example, in her book *Real Persons*, tries to do without thought-experiments and use only real examples. And Bernard Williams, though he has used bizarre thought-experiments in the past to argue for a criterion of personal identity based on bodily continuity, now warns that you can tell what is essentially the same story in different ways to generate different (and conflicting) intuitions.

**Parfit:** People appeal to bizarre examples for different reasons. Some people hope to vindicate one particular view about the true criterion of personal identity. I agree that can't be achieved. I also agree that, as

Williams says, we can produce different intuitive responses by giving different descriptions of the same case. But I appeal to such cases for a different reason. That is to get us to see, as Williams was the first to argue in his wonderful article 'The self and the future', that we are inclined to believe that our identity must be determinate. Suppose we imagine ourselves about to undergo some bizarre operation, and we ask, 'Will the resulting person be me? Or am I about to die? Is this the end?' As I've said, it's natural to assume that this question must have an answer. I appeal to such cases to show how compelling that assumption is.

On my view, our question would be empty. If we knew what was going to happen to our brain and body, and what kind of experiences would later occur, we would know everything there is to know. We would know everything, even though we didn't know whether we were about to die, or would wake up again. Instead of asking, 'Would the resulting person be me?', it would be clearer to ask, 'Would it be correct to call that person me?' That reminds us that there are not here, at the level of what happens, two different possibilities. There are merely two ways of redescribing what will happen. If we come to understand that fact, we ought to conclude, I believe, that our identity is not what matters. To use a slogan that I now find tempting, what matters is reality, not how it is described.

**Cogito:** Someone might try to resist your views at this point by admitting that, in some of the bizarre cases, there is no determinate answer to the question 'Will it be me?', but insisting that in almost all ordinary cases this question has a clear answer. Such a person might ask, 'Why should I take the subversive Parfitian message on board by generalizing from the bizarre cases?'

**Parfit:** That depends on what the message is. My claim is that what matters isn't personal identity, but certain other facts which normally go along with personal identity. I advance two different kinds of argument for this claim. The first appeals to imagined cases in which personal identity and these other facts come apart. When we think about such cases, we can be led to see, I believe, that it is the other facts which matter. Someone might say, 'I agree that, in

those bizarre cases, identity isn't what matters. But it *is* what matters in all ordinary cases'. That response is, I think, unreasonable. I'm appealing to a kind of inference that we often make. If X and Y always go together, and we think that X-and-Y together have a certain significance, we may wonder whether both matter, or only one of them matters. The obvious move is to imagine cases in which X and Y come apart. If we decide that, in these cases, it would be Y that mattered, we have good reason to conclude that, even in ordinary cases, it is Y that matters. This is like the use of artificial experiments in science. We create a purified situation in which two factors come apart, and then extrapolate our answer to the ordinary cases in which these factors hold together.

The other argument I've mentioned is quite different. That appeals to the general claim that, when we know the facts about physical and psychological continuity, there is a sense in which we know what would happen. Given a knowledge of those other facts, claims about personal identity do not give further information about reality, but merely tell us how, given our concepts, what happens can be redescribed. I then appeal to the claim that what matters is reality, not how reality can be described. This argument does not appeal to bizarre examples. It appeals to the implications of what I call a Reductionist view. On my view, though facts about personal identity are not the same as facts about physical and psychological continuity, they just consist in those other facts. When we see how that is true, we should conclude, I believe, that it can only be the other facts which matter.

**Cogito:** You are a revisionary metaphysician, in the sense that you think that we all hold certain deeply held, but incorrect, views about reality. Many such philosophers adopt a twofold strategy. First, they explain why our deeply held views in some area are incorrect; then they go on to provide an 'error theory': an account of how people come to hold such incorrect beliefs. Do you have an error theory to account for what are—on your view—our mistaken beliefs about personal identity and its importance?

**Parfit:** I have some thoughts on this subject, but they're not original. A partial explanation is that we are misled by our concep-

tual scheme. For example, as Williams argues in his 'Imagination and the self', if I try to imagine being Napoleon at the battle of Waterloo, it is easy to confuse that with imagining *myself* being Napoleon. If I confuse these two, I may conclude that what I really am can't be a particular human being, Derek Parfit. It makes no sense to imagine Derek Parfit's being Napoleon. So, if I think I can imagine *my* being Napoleon, I may assume that what I really am is not a human being, but what Williams calls a 'featureless Cartesian ego': one that might have swapped places with Napoleon's ego. Kant makes similar remarks. Our belief in such egos partly derives, he suggests, from our misunderstanding of the way in which the concept 'I' features in our thinking. This could provide part of an 'error theory'. But I think we also need other explanations, of other kinds.

**Cogito:** You claim that it would in principle be possible to describe all the facts about people in what you call an 'impersonal' way. You also seem at times to be recommending the adoption of a wholly impersonal conceptual scheme: one that did not even use the concept of a person as an abiding subject of experiences. You suggest that we could adopt that scheme without any real loss. Is that your considered view?

**Parfit:** It's clear that, if we fully adopted such a scheme, that might make a great difference to our lives. Some people think that it would undermine most of what matters, or has value. Others think that we would gain. Some Buddhist monks spend much of their time trying to think in impersonal terms. There's a fine book by Paul Breer, *The Spontaneous Self*, which recommends this approach. When we're really angry, he suggests, rather than thinking, 'I am angry', we should think, 'Anger has arisen here'. Even that, I think, might make a difference.

My present view is somewhat different. I have tried to imagine beings who are in other ways like us, except that their conceptual scheme contains no concept of a person, or subject of experiences. They have the concept of persisting bodies, and the concept of sequences of thoughts, experiences, and acts, each of which is directly related to some persisting body. But they don't ascribe thoughts to thinkers, acts to agents, or experiences to subjects. I am in-

clined to believe that this conceptual scheme, though very different from ours, would not be worse. It would provide, in its way, for as good an understanding of reality. I do not accept the Buddhist no self view, since I believe that persons exist. *We* are persons. But I believe that persons are not entities of a kind that must be recognized in any adequate conceptual scheme.

Some have made a similar claim about the concepts of persisting physical objects. We think of such objects as having spatial but not temporal parts. What exists, at any time, is the whole object. Quine and others argue that there could be an adequate scheme which did not use such concepts. On such a scheme, we would think only in terms of four-dimensional entities, which have temporal as well as spatial parts. The most familiar concepts of this kind are those of continuing processes. What occurs, at any time, is not the whole process but only one of its parts. Thus, when we see some person, we see the whole person, but if we see that person for only five minutes, we see only a very small part of that person's life. I am inclined to agree that, if we thought only in terms of four-dimensional entities, our scheme would be no worse. But that is different from my claim. Compared with the notion of persisting objects, which are all there at any time, the notion of persisting *subjects* is a much more isolated part of our conceptual scheme.

**Cogito:** What exactly are we supposed to learn from discovering the possibility of such alternative conceptual schemes?

**Parfit:** When we see that there's an alternative to our scheme, which would be no worse, that can free us from certain kinds of mistake. If we have only one scheme, and don't see that there could be alternatives, we may take too seriously some elements in our scheme. We are, as it were, imprisoned in it.

**Cogito:** So you think of this device of looking for alternative conceptual schemes as a sort of method for doing metaphysics. But you don't apply it directly: you don't for example conclude, from the existence of a coherent and adequate impersonal scheme, that there are no persons?

**Parfit:** No. Of those who defend the four-dimensional scheme, some claim that *all* objects have temporal parts: that there are no persisting objects which are all there at any

time. That seems to me a mistake. I think we should recognize that there can be alternative conceptual schemes which are both adequate, and which both make true claims about reality. That's why I'm not tempted to deny that there are persons.

The Buddhist no self view could be interpreted like this. As I've said, we are inclined to have certain strong beliefs about personal identity, such as the belief that our identity must be determinate. We might regard such beliefs as entering into our concept of a person. That would explain the claim that there are no persons. That would be a way of claiming that there are no entities with the special properties that we take persons to have: subjects of experience whose identity must be determinate. But I prefer to say that we are not entities like that.

**Cogito:** One of the uses to which the traditional conceptual scheme has been put is to provide a rational grounding for prudence. If we believe that we have a special relation to ourselves in the future which we don't have to other people, that has been thought to make prudence a pre-eminently rational form of practical concern. What implications do your views of identity hold for this subject?

**Parfit:** That question raises some difficult and complicated issues. Butler said of Locke's theory that, if it were true, we would have no reason to care about our future. I don't think that's right. We do have reason, I believe, to care about our future. But we may not have as *much* reason as some of us think we have. We have several kinds of concern about our future. One kind, which we might call *anticipatory* concern, we can't have about other people's future. If we know that our child will later be in pain, we may care more about that pain than we care about our own future pain; but we can't anticipate our child's pain. This kind of concern may, I think, be in some ways tied to certain false beliefs about personal identity, or what is involved in our own continued existence. If we lose those beliefs, that concern might be weakened, and shown to be groundless. But there are other reasons for special concern, which might be unaffected.

**Cogito:** What other sorts of reasons are you thinking of?

**Parfit:** One class of reasons are those described by Perry in his article 'The importance of being identical'. These reasons appeal to our present desires, projects, or ambitions. As Perry points out, we are likely to be the people who are best able to fulfil some of these desires. That gives us a derivative reason to want to remain alive and well. But such concern is very different from our ordinary concern. Suppose we know that we shall be destroyed, but that scientists will later make an exact replica of us. Though that replica will not *be* us, his similarity to us would make him just as good at fulfilling many of our plans and projects. Thus he could finish the book that we were writing. Perry claims that we would have as much reason to be specially concerned about the future of our replica.

**Cogito:** What if there was someone completely different—not a replica—who would be as good, or better, at carrying out our projects?

**Parfit:** That would also give us, on Perry's account, less reason to want to survive ourselves.

**Cogito:** So the big change here is that our reason to be prudent, or to care specially about our own future, becomes something entirely contingent?

**Parfit:** That's true, on Perry's account. But, as I've said, that account explains only one kind of reason for special concern. There are others. Thus, as several writers claim, most of us care specially about certain other people—such as our family or friends—and we might care specially about ourselves in the same kind of way. Since our family and friends are not identical to us, such concern would also be in a way contingent, and would not be founded on the fact of our identity over time. This concern is unlike Perry's, since it would also not be founded on our present projects. If we care about our friends, that need not be because we and they are trying to achieve the same things. But if we cared about ourselves in the future *only* in the kind of way in which we care about certain other people, some elements in our ordinary concern would, I think, be missing. The most obvious element is anticipatory concern.

**Cogito:** Is our concern about our friends based on reasons at all? Isn't this more like a Humean concern, that exists independently of reasons?

**Parfit:** That's a disputed question. Some writers, such as Whiting, defend Aristotle's view that our friendship should be based on our friends' admirable qualities. Others insist that love is not based on reasons, and that we should go on loving people however much they change for the worse. It's hard to decide when, and how, we have reasons for caring about our friends.

**Cogito:** But, when we do have such reasons, some of these don't look as if they would also justify our caring about our own future.

**Parfit:** Williams suggested that, on Aristotle's view, the ideal friend would be a three-dimensional mirror image of ourselves. And some suggest that, on such a view, we admire and love such friends because they have the qualities that we admire and love in ourselves. But this seems not to capture much of our ordinary self-concern. We can be specially concerned about our own future even if we don't admire ourselves.

**Cogito:** What other changes in our thoughts and attitudes might flow from this different way of thinking about persons?

**Parfit:** Another attitude worth mentioning is our attitude to our death. I know that, after a few more years, I shall not exist. That fact can seem very disturbing. But, on my view, it can be redescribed. It is the fact that, after a certain time, none of the experiences that occur will be connected in certain ways to my present experiences. That does not seem so bad. In that redescription, my death seems to disappear.

Time's passage is also relevant. When we are depressed by the thought of ageing and the approach of death, we are depressed by the fact that we shall have less and less to look forward to. That seems so bad because of our bias towards the future. If we lost that bias, perhaps because we concluded that time's passage was an illusion, that would make a great difference. I imagined someone

who was temporally neutral, and who cared in the same way about good or bad experiences, whether they were in the future or the past. Such a person would not be disturbed if he was about to die. Though he would have nothing to look forward to, he would have his whole life to look backward to. His position would be no worse than if he had only just started to exist, and had nothing to look backward to. Wherever he is in his life, he would have his whole life to look either backward or forward to.

**Cogito:** But your imagined man could still be upset that his life is less long than it could otherwise have been?

**Parfit:** Yes. If he had just come into existence, he might regard it as bad news that he had only 80 years to look forward. He might prefer to live for several centuries. Even so, if he was temporally neutral, he would regard it as no worse when, because he is about to die, he has *nothing* to look forward to, not even the pleasures or looking backward. He would still have 80 years to look backward to. If we had this attitude to time, that would change our attitude to ageing and death.

These remarks overlook those many attitudes of ours which involve our plans or projects. Since we can't affect the past, looking backwards cannot be just like looking forwards. But that's not what affects us most when we think we have nothing to look forward to. That is an attitude, not to the fulfilment of our plans, but to our experiences. Even after our death, our plans may be fulfilled. What disturbs us is that we shall not exist.

**Cogito:** We traditionally close these interviews by asking our interviewees about their extracurricular activities.

**Parfit:** I have, I think, only one distinctive activity: architectural photography, in colour. My subjects are Venice in all weathers, and Oxford and St Petersburg in mist and snow.