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II*—PARFIT ON PERSONS

by Quassim Cassam

I

According to what Derek Parfit calls 'Reductionism' about personal identity, 'persons are like nations, not Cartesian Egos'.¹ Only if persons are like Cartesian Egos, distinct from their brains, bodies and experiences, can we defensibly believe that personal identity matters.² Since we have good reason to believe that we are not such separately existing entities, we ought to conclude that personal identity is not what matters.³

On a traditional and plausible view of substance, nations are not substances. If a Reductionist, in Parfit's sense, must deny the substantiality of persons, then the Non-Reductionist options will include not only the Cartesian position, but also the view that a person is his brain,⁴ as well as versions of what has been called 'animalism'.⁵ This is a view of persons which claims that a person is an animal of a certain kind, and that it is necessary and sufficient for the persistence of a person that the animal with which he or she is identical persists. Since Parfit regards the 'brain theory'⁶ as Reductionist, it might seem that the analogy with nations is not to be taken too seriously. I will argue that Reductionism's defence of the thesis that personal identity is not what matters depends for

*Meeting of the Aristotelian Society held in the Senior Common Room, Birkbeck College, on 26th October 1992 at 8:15 p.m.

1 Parfit 1987, p. 275. For one important difference between this and earlier printings of *Reasons and Persons*, see n. 15. The label 'Reductionism' will be used in the present discussion exclusively as a label for Parfit's view. For a discussion of the relationship between 'Reductionism' and other versions of 'reductionism', see Cassam 1989, section I.

2 Parfit 1987, p. 216.

3 Parfit 1987, pp. 216–217.

4 See Nagel 1986, chapter III.

5 The label is suggested by Paul Snowdon in Snowdon 1990.

6 See Parfit 1987, appendix D.

much of its plausibility on the assumption that persons are not substances. If this reading is correct, then the Reductionist needs to show that thinking of persons as like nations is better than the best substantialist conception. I will argue that this is not a challenge which Reductionism can meet, once it is recognized that the best version of Non-Reductionism is not Cartesian but animalist.

II

Reductionism about personal identity makes the following claims:

- (A) The fact of a person's identity over time just consists in the holding of certain more particular facts.⁷
- (B) These facts can be described without either presupposing the identity of this person, or explicitly claiming that the experiences in this person's life are had by this person, or even explicitly claiming that this person exists. These facts can be described in an *impersonal* way.⁸

One version of Reductionism, the physical version, claims that X at t_1 is the same person as Y at t_2 if and only if (i) enough of X's brain continued to exist as the brain of a living person, and is now Y's brain, and (ii) this continuity has not taken a branching form.⁹ Another version of Reductionism, a psychological version, claims that personal identity just consists in the obtaining of non-branching psychological continuity or connectedness with the right kind of cause.¹⁰ Other Reductionist theses include:

- (C) Personal identity can be indeterminate.¹¹
- (D) The Reductionist should not try to decide between the different criteria of personal identity.¹²
- (E) Personal identity is not what matters.¹³
- (F) What matters is psychological continuity and connectedness with any cause.¹⁴

7 Parfit 1987, p. 210.

8 *ibid.*

9 Parfit 1987, p. 204.

10 Parfit 1987, p. 207.

11 Parfit 1987, section 86.

12 Parfit 1987, p. 241.

13 Parfit 1987, chapter 12.

14 Parfit 1987, chapter 13.

Having previously claimed that theses (A) and (B) are jointly constitutive of Reductionism about personal identity, Parfit now suggests that (B) is optional for the Reductionist.¹⁵ I will return to this below.

Parfit claims that if we are Reductionists, we will accept (C).¹⁶ A Non-Reductionist could also accept (C), but it is suggested that few Non-Reductionists would be likely to do so.¹⁷ Someone who rejects (C) is probably a Non-Reductionist.¹⁸ One might believe that our identity must be determinate without believing that we are separately existing entities, but Parfit argues that such a position would be indefensible.¹⁹ He also claims that (C) supports (D).²⁰ The point of (D) cannot be to suggest that according to Reductionism there is nothing to choose between different criteria of personal identity. Parfit regards Reductionist criteria as better than Non-Reductionist criteria, and some Reductionist criteria as better than others. The point must be that the Reductionist should not try to decide between the psychological and physical versions of Reductionism distinguished above. (D) is supported in Parfit's discussion not only by (C) but also by (E): 'if we are Reductionists, we should not try to decide between the different criteria of personal identity. One reason is that personal identity is not what matters'.²¹ It is also argued that (C) supports (E), which is described as the most important Reductionist claim.²² When it is indeterminate whether some future person will be identical to some present person, any decision either way would be arbitrary, and could not justify any claim about what matters.²³ (A) also supports (E) and (F). If the fact of a person's identity just consists in the holding of more particular facts, it is these latter facts that should matter.

I will argue as follows: neither (A) on its own nor (A) and (B) together constitute a satisfactory characterization of Reductionism

15 Parfit 1987, p. 210. This is an important difference between the 1987 reprinting and earlier printings.

16 Parfit 1987, p. 213.

17 Parfit 1987, p. 216.

18 Parfit 1987, p. 213.

19 Parfit 1987, p. 216.

20 Parfit 1987, section 86.

21 Parfit 1987, p. 241.

22 *ibid.*

23 *ibid.*

about personal identity. I will then discuss the reading of Parfitian Reductionism according to which its distinctive feature is its denial that persons are substantial entities.²⁴ Since animalism, which is a version of substantialism, ought to accept (C), Parfit is wrong to suggest that it would be unusual for a Non-Reductionist to maintain that our identity can be indeterminate. Equally, a view which rejects (C) might still deserve to be called Reductionist,²⁵ so it cannot be right to suggest that if we are Reductionists we will accept (C). Since the animalist who accepts (C) should deny (E), whereas a Reductionist who rejects (C) might still have good grounds for accepting (E), believing that (C) is true is neither necessary nor sufficient for one to be justified in believing that (E) is true. I will also argue that neither (C) nor (E) supports (D).

III

The simplest way of seeing what is wrong with Parfit's characterization of Reductionism would be to ask whether a Cartesian theory of personal identity is allowed to count as Reductionist by (A) and (B). Since the Cartesian theory is supposed to be the paradigm of Non-Reductionism, it would be extremely serious if it turns out not to be excluded by Parfit's tests.

The first test, which is supposed to be the more important of the two, is extremely problematic since it is unclear what it is for one fact to be 'more particular' than another. As for (B), on one interpretation²⁶ this amounts to the demand that the facts in which a person's identity consists can be described without employing the concept of a person, or presupposing personal identity. A Cartesian would claim that X is the same person as Y if and only if X has the same immaterial soul as Y.²⁷ Does this employ the concept of a person or personal identity in a way that is incompatible with passing (B)? Parfit attributes to Descartes the view that 'a person

24 This aspect of Parfit's position is also emphasized in Lowe 1991, section IV, and Ayers 1991, pp. 280–282. I am much indebted to Ayers' discussion.

25 As Parfit concedes in connection with what he calls a 'tidy-minded' version of Reductionism. This Reductionist insists that we ought to give questions of personal identity an answer 'even if we have to do so in a way that is arbitrary, and that deprives our answers of any significance'. Parfit 1987, p. 241.

26 See Shoemaker 1985, p. 447.

27 For a clear statement of the Cartesian position on personal identity, see Swinburne 1984.

is a *purely mental* entity: a Cartesian Pure Ego, or spiritual substance'.²⁸ Even if this is what Descartes thinks, it would not follow that when the Cartesian claims that personal identity consists in identity of soul, he is, in effect, employing the *concept* of personal identity in describing the fact in which X's identity with Y consists. The basis of the claim that a person is a spiritual substance need not be the assertion that the *concept* of a person is that of a soul, any more than someone who claims that a person is his brain is committed to thinking of this as a conceptual truth.²⁹

In any case, it is not even true that for Descartes a person is a purely mental entity, as Parfit frequently claims. Rather, a person is a union of two substances, body and soul,³⁰ such that the persistence of one of these substances (the soul) is sufficient for the persistence of the person. Again, there is an analogy with some versions of the 'brain theory' of personal identity. Although some brain theorists, such as Nagel, claim that *I am* just my brain, others deny this. As Mark Johnston remarks, from the fact that the survival of one's brain is necessary and sufficient for one's survival, it does not follow that persons are of the kind *human brain*.³¹ By the same token, from the fact that the survival of our immaterial souls is necessary and sufficient for our survival, it would not follow that persons belong to the kind *immaterial soul*.

Parfit's own gloss on (B), which was quoted above, also runs into difficulties with the Cartesian theory. Someone who claims that X is the same person as Y if and only if X has the same immaterial soul as Y is scarcely *presupposing* X's identity with Y. Neither is there any reference in the Cartesian criterion to the having of experiences. As for whether, in saying that X is the same person as Y if and only if X has the same soul as Y, one is claiming the existence of a particular person, the Cartesian is no more guilty of this than the Reductionist who claims that X is the same person as Y if and only if X has enough of Y's brain. Thus, even on Parfit's own reading, it is not clear that his second test for Reductionism

28 Parfit 1987, p. 210.

29 For an explanation of this point, see Nagel 1986, p. 40.

30 See Descartes' letter to Princess Elizabeth, 28 June 1643, in Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch and Kenny 1991, pp. 226–229.

31 Johnston 1987, pp. 78–79.

manages to exclude a theory which Parfit rightly regards as the paradigm of Non-Reductionism. So even if animalism were to pass this test for Reductionism, this would be of very little significance.

It appears, then, that Parfit's initial characterization of Reductionism about personal identity is unsatisfactory. A later attempt runs as follows: 'On the Reductionist View, personal identity just involves physical and psychological continuity. As I argued, both of these can be described in an impersonal way.... Personal identity just involves certain kinds of connectedness and continuity when these obtain in one-one form'.³² This is more promising than (B). The hope is that the emphasis on giving an account of personal identity in terms of these particular kinds of *continuity* will help to exclude the Cartesian theory from the Reductionist camp.

Unfortunately, as Parfit himself concedes, there is a 'kind of psychological continuity that...involves the continued existence of a purely mental *entity*...a soul, or spiritual substance'.³³ On this conception of psychological continuity, Cartesian dualism clearly satisfies the necessary condition for a position to count as Reductionist: it is an analysis of personal identity in terms of psychological continuity, the continuity of soul-substance. To deal with this difficulty, Parfit identifies another kind of psychological continuity, one which 'does not consist in the continued existence of some entity'.³⁴ Suppose, then, that a position is Reductionist if it analyses personal identity in terms of *non entity-involving continuity* (NEC). It will follow that the Cartesian theory is not Reductionist, and neither is animalism. Unfortunately, however, this criterion also results in the exclusion from the Reductionist camp of the claim that personal identity consists in the appropriate kind of physical continuity, the continued existence of the brain. For this *is* to appeal to a kind of continuity which involves the continued existence of an entity. Yet, by Parfit's lights, the 'brain theory' is a version of Reductionism. Since physical continuity involves the continued existence of an entity, the Reductionist's point is not that personal identity necessarily involves non

32 Parfit 1987, p. 275.

33 Parfit 1987, pp. 204–205.

34 Parfit 1987, p. 205.

entity-involving continuity, but rather that it involves either non entity-involving psychological continuity or (entity-involving) physical continuity.

What is the motivation for this hybrid account? If the Reductionist is willing to allow an analysis of personal identity in terms of the continuity of a physical entity such as the brain, why must psychological continuity be *non* entity-involving? Consider in this connection the following striking passage from Parfit's discussion:

my main claim is that persons are like nations, not Cartesian Egos...On the Reductionist View that I defend, persons exist...But persons are not separately existing entities...Since these views disagree about the nature of persons, they also disagree about the nature of personal identity over time. On the Reductionist View, personal identity just involves physical and psychological continuity.³⁵

As far as Parfit himself is concerned, the central point of the analogy is to draw attention to the fact that a person is not a being whose existence is all-or-nothing. I will argue that the analogy is doing more work in Reductionism than Parfit acknowledges. Once it is recognized that taking the analogy seriously commits one to denying that persons are substances, the brain theory, which is a form of substantialism, should no longer be classified as Reductionist.

On a realist view of substance,³⁶ the difference between a substance and entities like nations or communities is that the latter are, as Leibniz remarked, 'beings in which there is something imaginary and dependent on the fabrication [*fiction*] of our mind'.³⁷ Of course, it does not follow, as Leibniz thought, that substances have to be immaterial or indivisible, but there is something right about the suggestion that beings such as nations are mind-dependent 'modes', whereas substances are, in a sense which needs to be made more precise, *there anyway*. For the realist, what is right about it is that, as Michael Ayers puts it, the individuality of a mode is imposed by us, 'its boundary-principles or existence conditions

35 Parfit 1987, p. 275.

36 For a defence of realism, see Ayers 1991, parts I and III.

37 Letter to Arnauld, 28 November and 8 December 1686, in Garber and Ariew 1989, p. 79.

are set by our concept',³⁸ whereas an individual substance is 'a natural or real individual, in some sense "given" not "constructed"'.³⁹ Nations and clubs, unlike horses, are constructs; they are, in this sense, *notional* beings.⁴⁰

On a conceptualist view of substance, not even a true substance can differentiate itself from other things. There are, as David Wiggins puts it, 'no 'lines' in nature'⁴¹; it is we who impose the lines, *via* our sortal concepts, but not just arbitrarily. The version of conceptualism to be considered here is Wiggins' *conceptualist realism*,⁴² which maintains that there is a crucial difference for the theory of substance between natural things and artifacts. The latter are individuated with 'less logical determinacy and considerably greater arbitrariness'⁴³ than the former. Given the nomological foundation of natural kind concepts, 'it is in no way up to us what to count as persistence through change or through replacement of parts'.⁴⁴ In the case of damage to a watch or extensive replacement of its parts 'there is nothing theoretical or extra to discover, once the ordinary narrative of events is complete'.⁴⁵ Since a true substance is a natural thing, nations are not substances for the conceptualist realist, any more than they are for the realist. Like administrations and governing bodies, nations are 'social artifacts'.⁴⁶

The crucial test for the present reading of Reductionism is to see how much of what Parfit says about the nature and importance of personal identity can be made sense of, and be made to look plausible, on the assumption that persons are not substances. The present discussion assumes that both the realist and the conceptualist realist are animalists. This, together with the fact that many of Parfit's claims about the nature of persons are incompatible with viewing persons as substances on *either* view of substance,

38 Ayers 1991, p. 101.

39 Ayers 1991, p. 113.

40 Ayers describes nations as notional in Ayers 1991, p. 281.

41 Wiggins 1986, p. 170.

42 See Wiggins 1980, chapter 5.

43 Wiggins 1980, p. 90.

44 Wiggins 1980, p. 88.

45 *ibid.*

46 Wiggins himself does not describe nations as social artifacts, but he does use this label for administrations and governing bodies in Wiggins 1980, p. 99.

suggests that the differences between realism and conceptualist realism may not be crucial for present purposes. Since there is no reason why physical continuity should not have a bearing on the continuity of a notional being or social artifact, there is no conflict between the present reading of Reductionism as anti-substantialist, and its claim that personal identity may involve physical continuity.

All of this suggests the following revised version of the NEC criterion for Reductionism, which I propose to substitute for (A) and (B): the important point is not that the continuities in terms of which Reductionism analyses personal identity are not entity-*involving*, but that they are not *constitutive* of the persistence of a person *qua* substantial being⁴⁷ NEC, on this interpretation, just gives expression to the Reductionist's rejection of substantialism. It confirms the earlier suspicion that animalism should not be counted as Reductionist. The continuity of an animal is, no doubt, to be understood as involving some kind of physical continuity, but this continuity is constitutive of the persistence of the substantial animal with which one is identical, not just one of a range of continuities which are constitutive of the persistence of a notional being or artifact.

Suppose, then, that Reductionism about personal identity is understood as an analysis of personal identity in terms of this modified version of NEC. Is this necessary condition also sufficient? As noted earlier, Parfit suggests that (B) is optional for Reductionism. In fact, (B) runs together two quite distinct claims, only one of which can be optional. For Reductionism to escape the charge of circularity, the continuities in terms of which it accounts for personal identity must not presuppose personal identity. This is not the same as the other claim in (B), that these continuities must be describable without claiming the existence of a person. The latter 'impersonal description requirement' is not an essential part of Reductionism but Parfit must retain the resources to deal with the charge of circularity.⁴⁸ What this suggests is that it is both necessary

47 As Ayers points out, Locke regarded persons as substances with a distinctive principle of unity, namely consciousness. Since the continuity or sameness of consciousness is constitutive of the persistence of a person *qua* substance, Locke was not a Reductionist. See Ayers 1991, pp. 276–277.

48 The suggestion in Parfit 1987, p. 210, that the whole of (B) is optional for Reductionism is clearly a slip. Parfit goes on to argue in section 80 that psychological continuity does

and sufficient for a position to be Reductionist that it gives a non-circular account of personal identity in terms of NEC. What Cartesianism, animalism and the brain theory all have in common—a feature obscured by Parfit’s characterizations of Reductionism—is a commitment to the view that personal identity is a form of substantial identity.

IV

What is the significance of (C), the claim that personal identity may be indeterminate? For Parfit, the value of (C) is partly diagnostic: Reductionists will accept (C), whereas Non-Reductionists are likely to reject it. On one view, the identity ‘a=b’ might be indeterminate in truth-value if ‘a’ or ‘b’ or both lack a determinate denotation.⁴⁹ On the face of it, even the most committed Non-Reductionist should accept that a statement of personal identity might be indeterminate for *this* reason. What this suggests is that (C) on its own is of limited diagnostic value. The issue is not *whether* someone accepts that personal identity can be indeterminate but *why* he accepts this.

What is the Reductionist’s motivation for accepting (C)? Part of the motivation seems to be the conviction that there may be cases in which nothing which deserves to be regarded as the ‘true criterion of personal identity’⁵⁰ yields an answer to the question whether some future person will be identical to some present person. The true criterion would yield an answer if we were separately existing entities whose existence is all or nothing. But, according to Reductionism, we are not such entities. It is this claim which motivates Reductionism’s commitment to (C).⁵¹

This motivation for accepting (C) also seems to be available to many Non-Reductionists. It is true that animalists who are sympathetic to conceptualist realism will deny that a substance

not presuppose personal identity. Shoemaker 1985, pp. 446–447 also points out that Parfit runs together distinct claims. For criticism of the impersonal description requirement, see Cassam 1992.

49 For writers who are sceptical about the possibility of vague objects, this is the only sense in which an identity statement can be indeterminate in truth-value. See Noonan 1989, chapter 6. Cf. n. 61 below.

50 The phrase is Parfit’s. See Parfit 1987, p. 239.

51 See Parfit 1987, p. 240.

could be ‘individually indeterminate’.⁵² I will return to this point below. But animalists who are realists about substance should allow for cases in which it is indeterminate whether we have the same animal or not, and therefore whether we have the same person.⁵³ It does not follow, on this view, that one should not decide between the different criteria of personal identity, as (D) claims. For the realist animalist, the source of any indeterminacy in personal identity is precisely the fact that in some cases the application of the ‘true criterion’ (sameness of animal) yields no answer. The fact that the true criterion yields no answer in some cases is not a reason for denying that there is a single true criterion of personal identity.

Since (C) does not justify (D), what would justify it? Parfit claims that one reason for not deciding between the different criteria of personal identity is that personal identity is not what matters.⁵⁴ I will return to this shortly. On one view, the problem with (D) is that nothing could possibly justify it. The only entities that exist and can be referred to are such that (1) it is determinate what their criterion of identity is, and (2) this criterion yields a definite answer in every conceivable case. To suppose that persons do not satisfy these conditions is either to suppose that they do not exist or that we cannot refer to them. If persons exist, and we can refer to them, (D) is false.

Parfit’s reply is to argue that (2) sets an implausibly high standard. For example, since there is no criterion of identity for nations which meets the required standard, it would follow that nations do not exist or cannot be referred to.⁵⁵ If (2) is rejected, there might be cases, such as Parfit’s Physical Spectrum,⁵⁶ in which what the animalist believes to be the true criterion does not draw a sharp borderline, and in which personal identity would be indeterminate. If, in such cases, we insist on giving the question of personal identity an answer by drawing a line somewhere ‘our choice of this point will have to be arbitrary’.⁵⁷ An arbitrary choice

52 Wiggins 1986, p. 171.

53 Thus Ayers denies that ‘when dealing with natural individuals, any indeterminacy is due to “our concepts” and never to nature’. Ayers 1991, p. 320, n. 30.

54 Parfit 1987, p. 241.

55 Parfit 1987, p. 240.

56 A range of cases involving all the possible degrees of physical continuity. See Parfit 1987, section 85.

57 Parfit 1987, p. 241.

cannot justify any claim about what matters. Thus, ‘if this is how we answer the question about my identity, we have made it true that, in this range of cases, personal identity is *not* what matters’.⁵⁸ Because a line drawn at some point in the Spectrum would be arbitrary and cannot justify any claim about what matters, we should avoid drawing one. This would explain how, on the assumption that the sole point of (D) is to encourage one not to draw a line in the Spectrum, (E) is supposed to support (D). I will refer to this as the Spectrum Argument for (E) and (D). This argument does not require the Reductionist to deny (1).

The Spectrum Argument does not show that personal identity is not what matters in cases in which there is a non-arbitrary borderline. It is also ineffective against someone who does not insist on drawing a line in every case and who, like the Reductionist, is willing to tolerate some cases of indeterminacy. Consider the realist animalist who agrees that it might sometimes be indeterminate whether we have the same animal, and therefore whether we have the same person. He agrees with the Reductionist that since there is no non-arbitrary borderline, we should not impose one. He agrees that we can refer to persons even if what we take to be the true criterion of personal identity does not give us an answer in every conceivable case. But personal identity might still matter in the following way: a situation in which it is indeterminate whether an animal identical with me survives is preferable to one in which it is beyond dispute that no animal identical with me survives, and worse than one in which there is no question that an animal identical with me does survive.

Consider, next, conceptualist animalism. Suppose that, like Wiggins, it is willing to allow that there can be ‘indeterminate particulars’,⁵⁹ such as pools of water and pots of stew. In these cases, and to a lesser extent in the case of artifacts, we can ‘tolerate the fuzziness of identity questions, diachronic *and* synchronic’.⁶⁰ What cannot be tolerated is such fuzziness in connection with true substances, or the idea that questions of substantial identity are ever to be settled by stipulation. If an identity statement is indeterminate

58 *ibid.*

59 Wiggins 1980, pp. 205–6.

60 Wiggins 1980, p. 206.

in truth-value, that can *only* be the result of referential indeterminacy.⁶¹

The problem for the conceptualist animalist is to explain how, even on the assumption that a person is an animal, there could be a non-arbitrary dividing line in the central cases of the Physical Spectrum. The animalist may reply that there must be such a dividing line, even if we are not in a position to determine its location *a priori*. This is not the same as conceding that the line is undiscoverable, for, as Wiggins remarks, in the case of disputes concerning the identity of a natural thing, 'one can readily conceive of getting more scientific facts'.⁶² The Reductionist objects that while this may be true in some cases, the scientific facts will not help in the middle of the Physical Spectrum. Here we know *all* the relevant facts, but are still not in a position to give a non-arbitrary answer to the question of identity. The conceptualist animalist's reply is that it is not really conceivable that we should know how to answer *every* question *except* the question of identity.⁶³

The Reductionist need not deny that, in certain cases, assuming that we do not know all the relevant facts may represent the best practical policy in the face of apparent indeterminacy. The question at issue is what grounds the conceptualist realist has for insisting that there *has* to be a sharp borderline, even in cases like the Physical Spectrum. One argument for this claim is what might be called the Reference Argument: if there is not a sharp borderline even in this kind of case, we would not be able to refer to persons. This argument depends on (2), which the Reductionist has already rejected. But even if the Reductionist were to accept this argument, he could reply that it only shows that we must always be prepared to impose a sharp borderline, not that there must be a *non-arbitrary* borderline in the Physical Spectrum.⁶⁴ The conceptualist's insistence that there must be a non-arbitrary borderline turns on

61 In Wiggins 1986 this is claimed to be true of identity statements concerning not only true substances but also clubs and ships. The point seems to be that despite the relative fuzziness of artifact identity, reference to *any* 'entity' requires that its boundaries be precisified. Given a suitable precisification, even an identity claim concerning a club or ship cannot be indeterminate in truth-value.

62 Wiggins 1980, p. 88.

63 Wiggins 1991, p. 304, n6.

64 The Reference Argument only supports what Parfit calls a 'tidy-minded' version of Reductionism. See n. 25.

what will henceforth be referred to as the Artifact Argument. This is the argument that it only makes sense to claim that there is no non-arbitrary borderline in the Physical Spectrum if one thinks of persons as artifacts. Since we should not accept that persons are artifacts, we should not accept the argument that any sharp borderline in the Physical Spectrum must be arbitrary and so cannot justify any claim about what matters.

The Artifact Argument is implausible. There seems nothing incoherent in combining the insistence that persons are not artifacts with the denial that there is a non-arbitrary borderline somewhere in the Physical Spectrum. Indeed, many conceptualists would also reject the Artifact Argument. Whether a conceptualist who rejects this argument will be in a position to resist the Spectrum Argument for (E) is not a question which will be pursued here. The important point is that both realist and conceptualist animalists deny that we are separately existing entities, but still maintain, for different reasons, that personal identity matters. In order to make out his claim that we can only defensibly believe that personal identity matters if we believe that we are separately existing entities, the Reductionist needs to show that *both* animalist positions are indefensible. Since the realist actually agrees with (C), and since versions of conceptualism which reject the Artifact Argument might also be in a position to resist (E), it is not easy to see how the Reductionist is going to be able to defend his claim.

It was remarked earlier that the test for the reading of Parfitian Reductionism as anti-substantialist is whether this helps to make sense of what the Reductionist claims about the nature and significance of personal identity. It has already emerged how, at least for a Wigginsian conceptualist, Parfit's Spectrum Argument is incompatible with thinking of persons as natural things, and therefore as substances. It now needs to be explained why, even on a realist view of substance, Parfit is committed to denying that persons are substances. One of Parfit's main argumentative strategies is to set up puzzle cases in which it is alleged to be an 'empty question' whether we have the same person before and after some operation or procedure. Some empty questions have no answer. An empty question in this sense is 'Will it still be me?' in the central cases of the Physical Spectrum. Other empty questions do, in a sense, have an answer, but this is just a matter of finding

the best description of the outcome.⁶⁵ If Brown's brain were divided into two, and each half transplanted into separate bodies, would Brown be identical with one of the offshoots or with neither? According to Parfit, the best description would be that Brown is identical with neither offshoot.⁶⁶

For Parfit, an empty question is one that has no straightforward answer, but which is such that, even without answering it, 'we can know everything about what happened'.⁶⁷ Consider, in the light of this, Shoemaker's example in which Brown's brain is transplanted into Robinson's debrained body so that the resulting person, Brownson, wakes up claiming to be Brown. Is Brown the same person as Brownson? For Parfit, this is not an empty question; it is straightforwardly true that they are the same person because both the Reductionist criteria give this result. Suppose that an animalist were to object that on his criterion, Brown and Brownson cannot be the same person because they are different animals. Given (D), and the fact that the animalist is no Cartesian, it would be surprising if the Reductionist were simply to dismiss the animalist's protest. A more attractive response would be to concede that the question whether Brown is Brownson is another example of an empty question with a best description of the outcome: the best description, by the Reductionist's lights, would be that Brown is Brownson.

What makes a description the best description? How can we know everything about what happened in the Brownson case without answering the question whether Brown is the same person as Brownson? The point seems to be we can know all the 'natural' facts about the relationship between Brown and Brownson without giving an answer. The difference between an empty question which has an answer and one which does not is that in the former case, but not in the latter, the natural facts, in conjunction with what we *mean* by 'same person', yield a best description. If someone who knew all the 'facts' about the physical and psychological continuity between Brown and Brownson nevertheless refused to describe them as the same person, his error would consist in failing to choose

65 Parfit 1987, p. 260.

66 *ibid.*

67 Parfit 1987, p. 213.

the best description. Since, after all the natural facts have been described, the question of whether Brown is Brownson is linguistic or verbal, the Reductionist concludes that even if there is a best description, this cannot be what matters. As Parfit puts it, if we are merely choosing one of several descriptions of a single outcome, 'our choice of description is irrelevant to the question of how I should regard this outcome'.⁶⁸

This account raises many questions. Can such a distinction between natural and linguistic facts be sustained? Does it follow from the fact that a question is verbal that the answer cannot matter very much? The most important point, however, is that this way of thinking about the issue of personal identity is incompatible with regarding persons as substances, whether on a realist or realist conceptualist view of substance. For the realist, to ask whether A is the same nation as B is to ask a question the correct answer to which is determined by what we mean by 'same nation'. But that is because nations are notional beings whose boundary principles are set by our concept. A substance, however, is a given individual which is not to be thought of as sliced out of reality by our concept. If persons are substances, then the correct answer to the question whether Brown is Brownson is not just the one which accords with the way in which the phrase 'same person' is used in our linguistic community, but the one which accords with the nature of persons as they are in nature. If persons are animals, and if it is insufficient for the survival of a human animal that its brain survives,⁶⁹ it would be a mistake to say that Brown is Brownson—a mistake about the world, not just about our language. Since, for the realist animalist, the question whether Brown is the same person as Brownson is not verbal, the answer to it cannot lack rational or moral significance in the way that answers to purely verbal questions might be expected to lack such significance. As for the claim that persons are animals, this is to be defended not by appealing to the meaning of the word 'person', but by showing that the attempt to think of the

68 Parfit 1987, p. 285.

69 This is not to say that questions of animal identity are always straightforward, but it does seem plausible in the case of human animals that the removal and transplantation of the brain does not take the animal with it. See Snowdon 1991, pp. 112–113.

relation between a person and an animal as anything other than identity leads to incoherence.⁷⁰

For the conceptualist, even substances can only be differentiated by reference to our concepts, but it does not follow that questions about the identity of a substantial thing are questions about language. 'Person' does not mean 'human being', but if, as Locke claimed, a person is an intelligent, self-conscious being with reason and reflection, then human beings are persons.⁷¹ Our knowledge of the nature of persons is based on our experience of human beings,⁷² and the best way of understanding the nature of personal identity is to reflect on what is involved in the persistence of a human being.

For Parfit, the force of the intuition that Brown and Brownson are the same person is that a brain transplant is just the limiting case of receiving a new heart, lungs, arms and so on.⁷³ Even if this is so, however, it is a further question whether a human being can persist through such a replacement of parts. Whereas in the middle of the Physical Spectrum it was unclear whether we had the same animal, it is much clearer that Brown and Brownson are not the same animal. If the Reductionist insists that we can know everything that happened in the Brownson case without answering the question of personal identity, it would be less implausible for the conceptualist to claim that this involves thinking of persons on the model of artifacts. When we think of the extensive replacement of the parts of a watch, we can know everything that has happened without tackling the question whether it is still the same watch; there is, as Wiggins says, nothing to discover once the ordinary narrative of events is complete. In the case of a substance, there is still something we do not know, even after it has been established which parts have been replaced. What we do not know is whether it could have

70 As Ayers argues, if a person is a material object which is distinct from the human animal with which it is normally co-extensive, then, since the human animal also satisfies Locke's definition of 'person' (see n. 71), Locke will be committed to the incoherent conclusion that two substantial things of the same type can be in the same place at the same time. See Ayers 1991, pp. 282–285 and compare Snowdon 1990, section III.

71 As Snowdon remarks, 'if we ask to what entities the functional predicate (person), as elucidated by Locke does apply, the answer we all want to give is—a certain kind of animal, namely human beings'. Snowdon 1990, p. 90.

72 As Wiggins puts it 'being a human being is the only thing that we can make stand proxy for what it is to be a person'. Wiggins 1980, p. 174.

73 Parfit 1987, p. 253.

survived such a replacement of parts. If it is in the nature of human beings not to be able to survive brain transplants, we should conclude that Brown is not Brownson. Since this is not an answer to an empty question in Parfit's sense, it would be a mistake to claim that the answer cannot matter.

If Parfit's defence of (E) does turn on regarding persons as non-substantial, the obvious question to press is whether we *should* think of persons in this way. Before discussing this point, there is the following objection to be considered: the Reductionist might protest that it is possible to see why personal identity is not what matters *even if* we do *not* think of questions about personal identity as verbal. Suppose that the Reductionist accepts that sameness of animal is the true criterion, in the substantialist's sense, of personal identity, and that it is straightforwardly false that Brown is Brownson. It is still plausible that personal identity is not what matters, for when we think about the Brownson case, and put ourselves in Brown's shoes, we can see that it would be *irrational* for him to think that his relation to Brownson does not contain most of what matters. If this argument is successful, it would show that even if many of Parfit's remarks about the *nature* of personal identity do suggest that he thinks of persons as non-substantial, his main claim about the *importance* of personal identity can be defended even in the context of a quite different metaphysical framework.

This attempt to invoke what the animalist has to say about Brownson in *support* of the claim that personal identity is not what matters faces the following problem: for the animalist, one's interest in survival is an interest in the survival of the *animal* with which one is identical. Given the earlier remarks about what is involved in the survival of a *human* animal, Brown should not see the removal of his brain as compatible with the survival of the animal with which he is identical. If Brown is concerned that the animal with which he is identical should survive, then his relation to Brownson does not contain all or most of what really matters to him. If I regard myself as a substantial thing, an animal, it will make all the difference in the world to me whether the physical or psychological continuities which obtain between myself and some future person are such as to provide for the continued existence of the substantial entity which I take myself to be. This is not to say

that psychological continuity without the continued existence of myself is worthless, but only that, as Wiggins puts it, it is not 'a proper surrogate. . . for the continued existence of the one and only person that is me'.⁷⁴

If the Reductionist is right to claim that what the animalist has to say about Brownson strengthens the case for (E), he needs to justify the claim that it would be irrational for Brown to refuse to think of his relations with Brownson as a proper surrogate for his own continued existence. If one is already persuaded that personal identity is not of fundamental importance, one will have no difficulty convincing oneself that it would be irrational for Brown not to regard his relation to Brownson as a proper surrogate for his continued existence. Unfortunately, this way of motivating the charge of irrationality is not open to Reductionism, on pain of circularity. The problem is that the rationality or otherwise of Brown's reaction is not something which can be taken as given; one's assessment of Brown's attitude can scarcely fail to be conditioned, however indirectly, by one's views about the importance of personal identity. If that is so, Brown's alleged irrationality cannot be used as a *premise* in arguing that personal identity is not what matters.

In the light of these difficulties, the Reductionist's argument for (E) could only be strengthened by the adoption of a non-substantialist ontological framework. Suppose, then, that persons are not substantial beings. Why should a notional being be any less concerned with identity than a substance? The reply suggested earlier was that once Brown comes to see that the question whether he will be Brownson is purely verbal, he will no longer think that the answer can have deep significance. But there is still work to be done, for it might be wondered why even a notional boundary could not be morally and rationally significant. So even if a defence of (E) within a non-substantialist framework looks more hopeful than one which is substantialist in outlook, it is an open question whether even such ontological revisionism would have the radical consequences for ethics and rationality which Reductionism argues for.

74 Wiggins 1991, p. 311.

Fortunately, this is not a question which needs to be answered here. For even if such ontological revisionism does have these consequences, the revisionary Reductionist would then need to show that thinking of ourselves as non-substantial is a *better* way of thinking about ourselves than the best Non-Reductionist conception. The basic challenge facing the Reductionist is this: if persons are like nations, his claims about the nature and significance of personal identity *might* be plausible, but what grounds could one have for thinking that persons are like nations other than the belief that this is the conception which best fits what, by the Reductionist's lights, we ought to think about the importance of personal identity?⁷⁵

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