

Empirical Separateness:

A Rejection of Parfitian Support for Utilitarianism

Abstract

My goal in this essay will be to show, contra Parfit, that the separateness of *human* persons—although metaphysically shallow—has a moral significance that should not be overlooked. Parfit holds that his reductionist view of personal identity lends support to utilitarianism; I aim to reject this claim because it rests on the assumption that the separateness of persons has an arbitrariness that renders it morally insignificant. This assumption is flawed because our ‘person practices’ reflect the morally relevant aspects of human nature: if we imagine a species of person that is not naturally separated from each other, it is reasonable to suppose that the morality of this different species of person would be drastically different from human-morality. Thus, if the utilitarian wishes to offer a *human* moral theory, it overlooks the separateness of human persons with peril.

Keywords

Identity, Moral Theory, Persons, Separateness, Utilitarianism

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That there are *many different* persons no one denies. Human persons are separated from each other in the sense that, barring special circumstances,¹ the birth, health or death of one person is not nomologically related to the birth, health or death of any other person. While the fact that persons are separated from each other is not in dispute, the *moral significance* of this fact is a serious point of contention between consequentialists and non-consequentialists.

On the one hand, most non-consequentialists appear to agree that the separateness of persons has a moral significance that counts against the plausibility of consequentialism (or, more specifically, utilitarianism). Some non-consequentialists take the separateness of persons to be a “deep” fact about the nature of persons, and draw on the existence of a metaphysically individuated self in order to explicate such concepts as justice, property, egalitarianism, and agency.² On the other hand, consequentialists like Parfit have criticized non-consequentialists, arguing that it is morally appropriate to overlook the separateness of persons. According to a utilitarian like Parfit, the moral point of view is one that overlooks the specifics of *who* receives benefits and burdens because doing so is the most efficient way to produce the best state of affairs. In the words of David Brink,

¹ For *human* persons this is the norm, with the exception of some cases of conjoined twins. Unless otherwise specified, I will use “person” to refer to “human person” throughout this essay.

² John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Dennis McKerlie, ‘Egalitarianism and the Separateness of Persons’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18 (1988), pp. 205-26; Anthony Simon Laden, ‘Taking the Distinction Between Persons Seriously’, *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1 (2004), pp. 277-92; Christine Korsgaard, ‘Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18 (1989), pp. 101-32.

Utilitarianism is “person neutral” because “it is the magnitude of a good or harm, and not whose benefit or burden it is, that affects its moral importance.”³ On Parfit’s reductionist view of personal identity, the separateness of persons is a *shallow* fact, and thus he believes the utilitarians are correct—or at least more correct—to overlook its moral significance.

My goal in this essay will be to show, contra Parfit, that the separateness of human persons—although metaphysically shallow—has a moral significance that should not be overlooked. I will set out and criticize Parfit’s reductionist challenge against the significance of the separateness of persons. Let us assume Parfit is correct that persons are not separated in a ‘deep’ sense; it simply does not follow that the empirical separateness of persons is morally irrelevant. Parfit’s reductionist view of persons fails to supply support for utilitarianism.

Parfit’s Background Metaphysics

Parfit relies on a dichotomy between *deep* and *shallow* facts. Parfit holds that deep facts are facts about things that exist independently of our practices. Deep facts are universal features of reality that are the way they are totally independent of us.⁴ Facts that are not deep (shallow facts) are facts that are true because of us (facts about e.g. chess, nations or clubs). To extend this usage, I will take ‘deep entities’ to be entities that exist independently of us, and ‘shallow entities’ to be entities that depend on us for

³ David Brink, ‘The separateness of persons, distributive norms and moral theory’, in R. G. Frey and Christopher W. Morris (eds.), *Value, Welfare and Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 252-89 (p. 253).

⁴ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 336 and 339. This reading of Parfit is deeply indebted to Mark Johnston, ‘Human Concerns without Superlative Selves’, in J. Dancy (ed.), *Reading Parfit* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 149-79.

existence. Deep entities are metaphysically fundamental entities. If humans did in fact have Cartesian egos then this fact about us would be a deep fact (and Cartesian egos would be deep entities).⁵

Shallow entities are not, metaphysically speaking, fundamental. Clubs and nations are examples of such shallow entities. Parfit thinks that personal identity is similar to the identity of a club or a nation. Most philosophers are reductionists about the identity of clubs or nations over time: a club's or nation's continued existence involves nothing other than its members continued existence (or enough of them) and its members behaving together in certain ways. Parfit writes: "Suppose that a certain club exists for several years, holding regular meetings. The meetings then cease. Some years later, some of the members of this club form a club with the same name, and same rules."⁶ Is this second club the *very* same club? Or, is the second club another club that is exactly similar? According to Parfit, the statement: 'This is the same club.' would be neither true nor false.⁷

Parfit thinks that our views about personal identity over time can be informed by our views on the identity of a club over time. Persons are like clubs, Parfit argues, in the sense that both entities can have indeterminate identity conditions over time. If we choose to draw "sharp lines" where no lines exist—say, in a personal identity puzzle-case—then "we cannot believe that it [the line we drew] has, intrinsically, either rational or moral significance."⁸ The *particular* placement of the line is morally arbitrary;

⁵ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 227.

⁶ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 213.

⁷ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 213.

⁸ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 241.

wherever we draw the line would be merely based on our stipulations and thus “cannot justify any claims about what matters.”⁹

Parfit’s Support for Utilitarianism

Parfit claims that his view on personal identity over time offers support for utilitarianism. Parfit holds that persons are not separate in a metaphysically significant way. The question: “Is some future person 30 years from now me?” is potentially an empty question. When that question is empty, the boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’ are intrinsically fuzzy. Such a finding is relevant to the context of doling out benefits and burdens: maximizing the good should not be constrained by historical concerns of justice or by worries about which future person deserves particular benefits or burdens.¹⁰ Benefits and burdens ought to be distributed in whatever way that efficiently produces the best state of affairs; the separateness of persons would thwart efficiency and thus should be overlooked.

Specifically, then, what arguments are used by Parfit to support his claim that utilitarianism may permissibly overlook the separateness of persons? Parfit thinks his reductionist account of personhood offers “support” for utilitarianism, in the sense his view both “makes more plausible” and “helps to explain” utilitarianism.¹¹ Thus, we need to turn to his arguments for his reductionist account of persons.

⁹ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 241.

¹⁰ Parfit, ‘*Later Selves and Moral Principles*’, in Louise P. Pojman (ed), *Ethical Theory Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 5th ed. Belmont: Wadsworth, 2007. pp 113-26 (120-23).

¹¹ Parfit, “*Later Selves and Moral Principles*” p. 114.

Parfit's Reductionist View of Persons

Parfit's complex view of personal identity over time is a reductionist view. The two most prevalent reductionist criterion of personal identity over time are the physical criterion and the psychological criterion. The physical criterion, as the name suggests, holds that bodies are what is necessary for personal identity over time. More specifically, what is necessary for X today to be one and the same person as Y at some past time is if enough of Y's brain continued to exist and is now X's brain and there does not exist a different person who also has enough of Y's brain.¹² Thus, the physical criterion is a reductionist view because the question of identity of persons over time reduces to the holding of particular facts about bodies and brains.

The psychological criterion of personal identity over time is more functional in nature: so long as two persons, X and Y, have the same memories, capacities, intentions ("direct psychological connections") over time, then X is the same person as Y (assuming that no other person also has these same memories, capacities, etc.). Strong psychological connectedness might last several months, but surely not more than a couple of years: I can clearly remember yesterday and so am strongly psychologically connected to me-yesterday, but I only dimly remember January 1st, 2000 so I have a much weaker psychological connection to me-five-years-ago. *Psychological continuity* can link two persons X and Y separated by 10 or even 20 years. Psychological continuity exists between X and some person Y 20 years ago if and only if there is a *chain* of strong psychological connectedness that links X with Y. On the widest version of the

¹² Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 204.

psychological criterion, any cause at all that produces psychological continuity and connectedness will result in person X and Y being the same person.¹³

The reductive nature of both criterion of identity should be highlighted: identity of persons over time does not involve some further fact of the matter. Both views consider empirically observable data in order to determine personal identity over time—the difference between the two views lies in what evidence counts as the evidence that will settle the issue of identity.

Non-reductionist views of personal identity over time, on the other hand, do claim that there is a further fact involved. Parfit explains that these views consider persons to be separately existing entities: persons are not just their bodies, minds and psychology, but are something over and above these impersonally describable phenomena. The best-known non-reductionist views are ones that hold that persons are a purely mental entity, such as a Cartesian ego. In order to determine personal identity in a puzzle case, the non-reductionist just needs to know whether the person still has the *very same ego*; if not, then identity is not maintained.

One key difference between reductionist and non-reductionist views of personal identity over time is that reductionist views accept that in some cases a person's identity may be indeterminate (The non-reductionist has traditionally held that identity is always determinate: identity is either maintained or not and there is no other option). According to the reductionist, if you found out that you were going to be the subject of a mad scientist's neurological experiment, the issue of whether you survive your medical ordeal or not would be an "empty question". An empty question is a question that has no answer (unless we stipulate one). Parfit's "combined spectrum" thought experiment is

¹³ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 207.

supposed to offer evidence for the indeterminacy of identity in at least some (logically possible) cases:

[Combined Spectrum: Imagine a range of cases. At one end of the spectrum, I awake tomorrow after a mad scientist has conducted his experiments on me and find that I am both physically and psychologically identical with the person I was before the experiment. At the far end of the spectrum, the] resulting person has no continuity with me as I am now, either physically or psychologically. In this case the scientists would destroy my brain and body, and then create, out of new organic matter, a perfect Replica of someone else. Let us suppose... this person to be Greta Garbo.¹⁴

The cases Parfit is interested in for the purpose of proving the indeterminacy of personal identity are the range of cases in the middle of the spectrum. Parfit argues that if you find out that you are about to have these experiments conducted on you so that at the end of the experiment you would be half Greta Garbo and half you, there would be no answer to the question of whether or not you survived your ordeal. The question of your survival is empty.

Parfit argues that the combined spectrum demonstrates the indeterminate nature of personal identity over time and thus shows that non-reductionist views of personal identity over time are false.¹⁵ While Parfit does think that personal identity over time is indeterminate, he also argues that we should not let this fact bother us. This fact should not bother us because what matters on issues of survival is psychological connectedness and continuity with any cause (what Parfit calls “Relation R”); personal identity does not matter.¹⁶

¹⁴ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 236-37.

¹⁵ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 239.

¹⁶ Parfit offers yet a few more science fiction cases that purport to prove that personal identity is not what matters in survival, but exploring these thought experiments is not necessary for our current purposes.

To sum up: according to Parfit, persons exist; however, persons are merely shallow entities. Thus, persons, like clubs and nations, can in some cases have indeterminate identity conditions over time because their identities are fully reducible without remainder to the holding of more particular facts. The four-dimensional boundaries of persons are fuzzy. In such cases of indeterminacy, we do create conventions for everyday life—our ‘person practices’—but, being shallow, the boundaries generated by our conventions are of little moral significance.¹⁷ Parfit explains:

[Reductionists] regard the unity of each life as, in its nature, less deep, and as a matter of degree. We may therefore think the boundaries between lives to be less like those between, say, squares on a chessboard, dividing what is all pure white from what is all jet black. We may think these boundaries to be more like those between different countries. They may then seem less morally important.¹⁸

We are not carving the world at the joints when it comes to person and nations because there is no *way-the-world-is* that can be carved. Parfit seems to think that because we carve out these entities by convention and stipulation their boundaries lack moral significance or, at least, what significance they have may permissibly be overlooked. Parfit assumes that metaphysical primacy is a more appropriate carrier of moral significance than something that is not metaphysically primary; he assumes that our level of caring should match metaphysical depth.

¹⁷ It is worth emphasizing that Parfit is not saying that “persons” ought not have any moral significance because, like e.g. witches, persons fail to exist.

¹⁸ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 339.

Johnston's Critique of Parfit

Johnston, in his paper “Human Concerns without Superlative Selves”, points out that Parfit’s arguments force us to examine “the relation between metaphysics and our practical concerns.”¹⁹ Even if we assume Parfit is right—that, for the most part, we operate with a false metaphysical view about our nature—Johnston reminds us that it is not totally clear how this error should impact our practical lives. Johnston charges Parfit with creating a false dilemma: it is not true that either our practices must be based in deep entities like souls or else be morally insignificant.

Johnston thinks another alternative is that our practices that involve persons take their basis in our empirical nature. Humans are naturally the kinds of creatures that have self-referential patterns of concern. This said, our practices regarding personal identity, while “natural”, are not uniquely and specifically determined by nature; these practices are not immune to criticism. Thus, Johnston agrees that our person practices are not self-justifying, but he also thinks he can appeal “to a broadly coherentist view of justification”²⁰ for the *entire* practice. He writes: “Concerns that are natural and fundamental have a certain kind of defeasible presumption in favour of their reasonableness; they cannot all be thrown into doubt at once, for then criticism would have no place from which to start.”²¹ While Johnston applies this insight to challenge Parfit’s view about what matters in cases of survival, I will focus on the natural basis for the moral significance of the separateness of persons.

¹⁹ Johnston, ‘Human Concerns’, p. 149.

²⁰ Johnston, ‘Human Concerns’, p. 158.

²¹ Johnston, ‘Human Concerns’, p. 158.

Empirical Separateness

While there is no deep metaphysical basis for the separateness of persons, I will argue that this fact does not necessarily offer support for utilitarianism without further assumptions. Parfit assumes that the empirical separateness of persons has no moral significance, and I will deny this assumption. In order to make this case, I will flesh out Johnston's claim that our person practices have a natural basis.

What person practices do we have that underpin the separateness of persons? As a start, it is worth emphasizing that in the work-a-day world, as we encounter them and as we are them, we take persons to be separated from each other; exceptions or confusing cases are few and far between. First, our person practices take persons to be separated in the past. Each person has memories from the point of view of one person. Our person practices take these memories to be a key basis for our self-knowledge and self-unity. Second, our person practices take persons to be separated in the present, both physically and mentally. Persons are physically separated from each other in the sense that a person may, for the most part, physically move about as he or she wishes. Furthermore, persons are separate actors: when a person tries to do something or think something, there is no other person that is also, thereby, doing or thinking something. Our person practices take a person to bear a special responsibility relation for what he or she wilfully does and only what he or she wilfully does. Lastly, our person practices take persons to be separate in the future. Persons have plans, commitments and projects. The only way that it would be possible for plans, commitments and project to be intelligible and significant is if persons keep separate from one and other in the future.

These person practices reflect facts about the species typical nature of humans. First, all humans have a particular history and our person practices that separate our past lives reflects this fact. Knowledge of the particulars of this history is a valuable resource for a human: telling the difference between friend and foe, edible and poisonous, and mate-worthy or not mate-worthy are abilities that are bound up with recalling the details of one's *particular* history. A human's access to his or her own particular history is a key to survival. Second, our person practices that separate humans in the present reflect the fact that each human is an individual living organism: humans are physically separated from other things in ways similar to how all organisms are separated from other things. It is empirically false that humans are a "super organism" like e.g. a hive of bees or a colony of ants.²² Lastly, our person practices that separate humans in the future reflect the fact that most humans are capable of rational prudence. The human ability to plan for the future not only allows us to weather the tough times nature may throw our way, it also allows us to live a flourishing life. Humankind's ability to plan allows humans to access lives that are worth living. Having a life plan—which includes promises and projects—is one of the key evolutionary resources of our species.

Our person practices, for the most part, operate undetected; they structure our thinking about our self and others without us being consciously aware. Yet, these practices can be challenged by strange or unusual cases. Perhaps the most challenging of these types of cases are diseases or injuries that have long-term physiological and psychological impact. Yet, even if Parfit is correct that in a case of this sort the metaphysical identity of the person is indeterminate, it is false that our person practices

²² Parfit agrees: see Parfit, 'Later Selves and Moral Principles', p. 120. See also: Suzuki, David. *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering our Place in Nature* (Vancouver: GreyStone Books, 2002), p. 141.

are morally irrelevant. In fact, it is in these confusing cases that our person practices become most salient.

Consider the following case: Ted is seriously injured in a work-place accident. While his brain-surgery is considered successful, some tissue is removed and as a result Ted is left in a coma. Six weeks pass, and then Ted starts to wake. Ted's long-term memories are absent: he doesn't remember graduating from high school, marrying his wife, or being a father for his two young daughters. Ted suffers from amnesia; luckily, Ted's doctor says his condition is at least partially reversible. Undaunted by the difficulties that Ted's recovery imposes on his family, his two daughters and Sandy, Ted's wife, work tirelessly to assist him in whatever recovery he can manage. Ted's therapy is the most difficult for Ted; yet, difficult or not, Ted does not doubt for one second that the best thing for him to do is gain back as much of his memory as possible.

The case of Ted is unusual but not unheard of; furthermore, the attitudes and reactions of Ted, his family and his doctor do not strike us as odd or inappropriate. Yet, on Parfit's reductionist account of personal identity, there is no answer to the following question: when the man in the hospital wakes up after being in a coma for 6 weeks (post-coma man), is he the same person he was before the accident? If post-coma man is a different person from Ted, then we have a clear case that violates the separateness of persons: there is no sharp boundary between Ted and post-coma man (Ted and post-coma man are two different persons that fail to be metaphysically separated in a deep way over time). It is up to our person practices to generate a response in this case. There is no deep reason for drawing the line at some point in time when Ted ceased to exist and post-coma man came into existence.

If Parfit is correct about his complex view of personal identity offering support for utilitarianism, the following questions should be challenging and particularly difficult ones: Is Sandy still married, or is she now a widow? What property, if any, does post-coma man own? Who is on the hook for post-coma man's hospital bill? Yet, these questions are not particularly difficult or challenging. Our person practices provide us with reasonably clear answers to these questions: post-coma man is identical with Ted. Our response to patients who recover from a coma is to claim that the person who survives the ordeal is the same person as the person who suffered the trauma in the first place. It is obvious that this claim of identity matters and ought not be overlooked; if you doubt this claim, think of how ridiculous it would be trying to explain (and justify) this doubt to Sandy, Ted and his two daughters. While there might be no deep reason for demarcating the identity of the man in the hospital, the issue of the man's identity is surely not *arbitrarily* decided

Our person practices are significant for us because our person practices reflect features of the nature of our species. Human are not the types of creatures that can easily ignore strong feelings of partiality (think of Ted's family, and how they worked tirelessly to help him remember his past life). Our person practices reflect these, and other, natural features of our biological make-up. While our person practices may be tested in a case like Ted's, it is in cases of this exact sort that our person practices are morally significant for the people involved. Parfit is wrong to think that the metaphysical shallowness of personal identity should lend support to the claim that our person practices may permissibly be overlooked.

Morality and Our Species Nature: The Mergers and the Collective

So far I have argued that our person practices are partially determined by the nature of our species. Now I will argue that the empirical separateness of persons is morally significant: if our human nature was different, then it is plausible to hold that our person practices would be different as well. I take this relationship of dependence to constitute some evidence that our empirical separateness is a morally relevant feature of our species.

Persons have features that are morally significant. A feature of persons plays a structural role in *human*-morality when that feature is a necessary condition for morality-for-us-human persons to have the general structure it has.²³ One salient example of a morally significant feature is the human capacity to suffer. One way to demonstrate this structural role is by a counter-factual thought experiment: imagine a species of creature exactly like us in every way, save that this species lacked the feature of persons being examined (i.e. the capacity to suffer). Is it plausible to hold that the basic structure of such a creature's morality is different from human-morality? Yes, it would be. It is constitutive of morality-for-human-persons that it involves, or says something about, the fact that we suffer. A reasonable hypothesis that explains the differences between a moral theory for us and a moral theory for these other creatures is that our capacity to suffer is of moral significance.²⁴

²³ For a comprehensive exploration of "nature to morality methodology" see Robert Noggle, 'From the Nature of Persons to the Structure of Morality', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 31 (2001), pp. 532-66.

²⁴ Some features of human persons would not be of moral significance. For instance, human persons are naturally bi-pedal. This feature is not of moral significance because if we conducted a similar thought experiment, it is not true that the structure of morality would change in any significant way.

Suppose that there exists a race of beings that are like humans in all ways, with the exception that they lack the separateness of persons that human persons in fact have. I can imagine two ways that such beings would not be separated from each other. First, we could imagine these beings not being separated in body. Second, we could imagine these beings not being separated in consciousness.

Imagine a race of beings exactly like humans but for the fact that they spontaneously merge bodies (the ‘mergers’). Once every few years, a merger would find him or herself to be a ‘single’ (an unattached merger). A single would seek out another single and the two beings would shake hands, and then the two hands would spontaneously merge. Once fused, the two beings would remain fused for several years. Both members of the pair would be aware of what occurred to the shared appendage: if the appendage is tickled, they both laugh; if the appendage is cut, they both feel pain. Of course, each of the pair of mergers would still have the same sets of desires, intentions and preferences that he or she had previous to the current merging. Furthermore, consent from both mergers is not necessary for one merger to *try* to initiate an action, move about, etc., (each merger could thwart or co-operate as he or she saw fit). In most cases, mutual co-operation would be essential for mergers to live their day-to-day lives. After 3 or 4 years as a pair, the beings would spontaneously split and then the process would start all over again (until the split spontaneously occurred, no safe medical procedure had been found to separate a pair of mergers). For these beings, how would morality be different?

Obviously, it is difficult to exhaustively imagine the many systemic differences between merger-morality and human-morality. The most salient moral difference between the moral lives of such beings and our own would be that, once merged, it would

not be true that each person has his or her own life to live. Being a merger would not mean living one's own life; for the most part, living would be a continuous compromise between oneself and one's current partner. In a literal sense, one's body would not be entirely one's own. The very basic freedom of movement that is species-typical of human persons would not exist for mergers. One particular upshot of this difference for the mergers would be that promise conventions and legal obligations would have to become far more flexible compared to human conventions because it would be far more common for it to be physically impossible for mergers to fulfill self-imposed obligations. Assuming merger-morality included the ought-implies-can-principle, merger-morality would be quite different from human-morality, at least in terms of the details regarding self-imposed commitments like promises.

Aside from freedom of movement and choice being seriously curtailed, one other difference between the mergers and humans would be these beings' views on desert. If one member of a pair has been proven to be the guilty party in a capital case, almost all forms punishment would directly affect two people and not one. Consider the case of a merger who is a violent psychopath. In order to protect society from this merger's violent rampagings, merger morality might permit the psychopath's incarceration even in cases where his incarceration entails the incarceration of his completely innocent partner.²⁵ Until the pair of mergers un-merge, the innocent member of the pair would languish behind bars; while human-morality might condemn locking up known innocent persons, merger morality might view such a case as morally innocuous. Locking up a known innocent merger is a morally acceptable cost of keeping merger society safe. In

²⁵ Perhaps the psychotic merger committed the violent rampages while he was a single, and it is only now that he is merged that the evidence of his foul deeds have come to light. Alternatively, the capital offences may have been committed after the psychotic merger drugged his current partner into a stupor.

short, merger-morality would be systematically different than human-morality. The mergers demonstrate that our separateness of person is a morally relevant feature because if we were not separated in body, our morality would be systematically different. My hypothesis is that it is our separateness of persons that can account for this systematic difference.

Perhaps a systematic difference is not enough to offer convincing evidence for the claim that the separateness of persons is a morally significant feature. Merger morality might be systemically different but it would not be *different in kind* from human-morality. Perhaps this criticism of my first thought experiment is plausible; however, there is little doubt about the significance of the second way in which a species of beings could fail to be separated.

Imagine a species of beings that have bodies just like ours but share a common mind: when one of the beings remembers something or imagines an image, the memory or image is common to all (the 'collective'). When one member of the collective suggests to the common mind a course of action, all of the collectives know of the suggestion and a common intention is reached. All members of the collective are mentally transparent to each other. Benefits and burdens are experienced by all: one collective's pain is another's. If one member of the collective wins the lottery, all of the members feel the elation of a large windfall. Similar science fiction examples immediately come to mind (e.g. Star Trek's Borg).²⁶ For the collectives, how would morality be different?

The moral differences between collective-morality and human-morality would be so substantial that it is hard to imagine. Of special significance to moral theory is that

²⁶ This example was brought to my attention by Robert Noggle (personal correspondence).

pain and pleasure are common to all. In the context of distributive justice, epistemic issues regarding the relative size of benefits and burdens would not be a source of concern for collective-morality. Furthermore, issues involving individual responsibility would not arise: each member of the collective does what the common mind, on balance, intends. The collective may collectively have responsibility for something one member of the collective did, but individual members would not.

The collective would not be like a species of beings at all, but instead more like one moral agent.²⁷ Each member of the collectives would be more like a unit that *composes* something of moral importance than like a thing that is itself of special moral worth (in the same way that the cells of my body compose me, an entity of special moral worth). Without the type of separateness of consciousness humans do possess, the basic structure of collective-morality would be vastly different in kind when compared to human-morality (e.g. agency would not apply to each individual collective). I hypothesize that the source of this difference is that these beings lack the separateness of persons. If this hypothesis is plausible, then the separateness of persons has a moral significance that our *human* morality ought not overlook. Moral theories cannot ignore or overlook the morally significant features of humans and expect to be a moral theory that applies to *human* persons.

²⁷ R. M. Chisholm, 'Scattered Objects', in J. J. Thomson (ed.), *On Being and Saying: Essays for Richard Cartwright* (Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1987), pp. 167-73. An object can be scattered around a room (e.g. a *set of dishes*, or a *set of golf clubs*.) Sets of dishes and sets of golf clubs can be thought of as "scattered objects". Perhaps the Collective would view *itself* as a "scattered agent"?

Conclusion

Our person practices are a reflection of the empirical separateness of persons. The separateness of persons takes its basis in the morally relevant aspects of our species' empirical nature; it has a moral significance that should not be over-looked. Parfit is wrong that his complex view of personal identity offers support for utilitarianism. Assuming that utilitarianism aims to be moral theory for *human* persons, the utilitarian overlooks the moral significance of the separateness of persons at great peril.²⁸

²⁸ I would like to thank the many people who have read drafts of this essay and then took the time to offer succinct criticisms and encouragement, including Scott Anderson (and all the members of his Ethics Reading Group), all the members of the Parfit Reading Group, Zohar Geva, Dominic Lopes, Cory Fairley and especially Catherine Wilson.

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