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Well-Being and Self-Interest:

Personal Identity, Parfit, and Conflicting Attitudes to Time in Liberal Theory and Social Policy

I. INTRODUCTION

Classical liberal accounts of well-being and its enhancement depend on particular views of self-interest, attitudes to time, and personal identity. For example, Adam Smith (2011, p 216), Henry Sidgwick (1981, p 381), and John Rawls (1973, p 420), variously argue that someone acting in her self-interest has a neutral attitude to time. Her future self has the same importance to her as her present self, and she acts accordingly. This enables her to plan for her future – sometimes enduring short-term present pain for long-term future well-being – knowing that overall her life will go better. These prudent choices are therefore informed by her taking stock of her life led *as a whole*, having no bias to specific time periods (also see Brink, 2003, 1997).

However, there are problems viewing the experience of time neutrally which Derek Parfit explores in his seminal book *Reasons and Persons* (1987). Promoting temporal neutrality, while may explain our attitudes and preferences regarding many of our future plans, does not accommodate other emotional biases we have toward the present and near-future, over the past and distant-future (Parfit, 1987, pp 149-186). Typically, a person is emotionally relieved when her past pain is over but dreads her near-future anticipated pain. These highly contrasting affective responses to personal pain are understandable, given our experiences across time, but are straining the temporal neutrality promoted by classical liberals.

The argument here, though, is that despite Parfit's insights, his conclusions about personal identity oppose key aspects of many contemporary conceptions of well-being. Parfit's reductionist understanding of personal identity argues that identity is reducible to the physical and especially the psychological characteristics of "continuity and connectedness" which are often fragile over time (Parfit, 1987, pp 261-275; pp 312-315). Consequently, personal identity is not indivisible and definitively singular, but plural and ambiguous, which explains why we are not temporally neutral when we protect our self-interest and enhance our well-being over time. Consider who we are now as, say, middle-aged adults, compared with who we were in our twenties, and then as young children. Our desires, preferences, goals, ambitions, and psychological make-up, are/were very different in each time period reflecting the very different identities we possess over our lifetimes (Parfit, 1987, pp 313-314). However, a non-reductionist view of identity ignores the inevitable and reasonable bias we have to the different person we are now over the different person we might be in the medium to long-term future (Parfit, 1987, pp 277-278; pp 317-320).¹ Instead, temporal neutrality assumes we have the same identity and so are the same beneficiary over time, and that this identity therefore exists separately to our changing psychological and physical experiences (Parfit, 1987, p 275).

Nevertheless, Parfit's reductionist view, notwithstanding its insights, complicates any evaluation of a person's life concerning her well-being, as evaluating how well a life is going *overall* is

¹ Indeed, for Parfit, in certain ways it might be better for us if we were more like 'Timeless' – a creature who has no bias toward the present and the near-future over the past and distance future (see Parfit, 1987, pp 176-177). The problem though, for Parfit, is that we are not like Timeless.

made more difficult than the non-reductionist view. Interpersonal comparisons of welfare are notoriously problematic as the levels and quality of well-being is hard to meaningfully measure between different persons. But these problems also become salient with intrapersonal comparisons if plural identities occur over time for one person, as Parfit's reductionism has it (and see Braddon-Mitchell and West, 2001). Nevertheless, the main recommendation here is to offer a 'hybrid' account of personal identity, combining both reductionist and non-reductionist views which, it is claimed, makes better sense of contemporary social policy debates about well-being enhancement, even though these views pull in opposite directions. Old-age pensions and disability policy are examined to address these issues and the above complexities and difficulties.

II. LIBERAL SELF-INTEREST AND RATIONALITY

Parfit's insights, just outlined, raises serious difficulties for classical liberals, such as Henry Sidgwick, Adam Smith, and John Rawls, as he is fundamentally challenging their accounts of rationality, individual self-interest, and, by implication, well-being promotion. The logical scheme of these classical liberals regarding their view of individual self-interest and rationality runs roughly as follows:

Premise 1: A person acting rationally and in her self-interest will impartially reflect on her life overall, and will realise:

Premise 2: Her future self has the same importance to her as her present self, as both are equally connected to her as one indivisible person.

Therefore: Insofar as she can be sure of what will happen in the future, she should give as much consideration to her future self as her present self so exercising ‘temporally neutrality’, given she is the same beneficiary in each time period.

Following the above, rational long-term plans are implemented contributing to a person’s life going well overall, enhancing her well-being. So, there are good reasons for accepting some pain and hardship now, if this furthers her long-term future interests. She studies hard now, sacrificing present pleasures, enabling her to pass exams and get a good job in the future; she undergoes painful and uncomfortable exercise now to become, in the future, fit and healthy, and so on. Consequently, this person views time neutrally, enduring present pain and hardship to further her future self-interest, but thereby enhancing her well-being over the whole of her life. This is seen as rational because she sees herself as the same beneficiary, both now and in the future, and therefore rationally can give equal weighting to her interests over time.

The problem though, identified by Derek Parfit, is that temporal neutrality seems irrational when we reflect on our emotional responses to experiences in the past, the present, the near and long-term future. For example, past pain matters much less to us now than pain in the near-future. We fearfully dread pain when we know we will experience pain soon, but we are relieved when our pain is over. For Parfit, this affective bias we have toward near-future pain over past pain is straightforwardly explained: “We are concerned about these future pains simply because they are not yet in the past.” (Parfit, 1987, p 168). However, if this is the case, then we cannot always associate temporal neutrality with rationality.

If [the person who is temporally neutral] condemns the bias towards the near because it cannot have rational significance *when* some pain is felt, he must condemn the bias towards the future. He must claim that it is irrational to be relieved when some pain is in the past. Most of us would find this hard to believe ... most of us would disagree. (Parfit, 1987, p 170 – his emphasis).

This chapter now examines Parfit's position more closely, exploring how his argument also depends on a reductionist view of personal identity. This view, though, also raises difficult problems for contemporary understandings of well-being and how these understandings are, in turn, applied to social policy and welfare practice.

III. PARFIT AND THE PROBLEMS OF REDUCTIONISM

Underpinning Parfit's objections to temporal neutrality, and the classical liberal view of rationality and self-interest, is his reductionist view of personal identity which radically contrasts with the non-reductionist view underpinning these classical liberal accounts (for example, see Parfit, 1987, pp 313-315). Returning to premises 1 and 2 outlined above, part of the classical liberal case for temporal neutrality depends on the further assumption that we have one irreducible identity which is the same across time, and to which we self-reflectively refer when making plans. Consequently, a person impartially reflects on her life overall (premise 1), and, in the process, different periods of her life are given equal consideration (premise 2), only by further assuming that the person who experiences the future is irreducibly identical with the person she is now, or the person she once was when considered from this future perspective. If we assume this non-reducible "further fact" concerning personal identity – that a person's

identity is exactly the same over time, and so occurring separately to her physical and psychological characteristics which change over time (Parfit, 1987, p 210) – then we can understand why a person endures pain now, anticipating her future long-term interests will be enhanced. She enhances her future self-interest, even if this involves experiencing pain now, because she knows now that she will be exactly the same person in the future. Indeed, without the assumption of this “further fact”, occurring separately to her physical and psychological characteristics, we cannot make sense of temporal neutrality. Briefly put, there would be much less reason for her to act in support of her future long-term interests, as the ‘her’ may be a different person and so not therefore irreducibly identical in each time period (and see Stocker, 1997; Braddon-Mitchell and West, 2001; Brink, 2003, p 223).

However, according to Parfit, despite its intuitive attractions we cannot just assume this further fact, as personal identity over time, contra the classical liberal account, is indeterminate and ambiguous (for example, Parfit, 1987, pp 213-215). Rather, what matters in questions of ‘identity’ is psychological continuity and connectedness (memory, personality, opinions, ambitions, desires, values, and so on) which may relate, to lesser or greater *degrees*, to a person’s past, present and future selves. Therefore, Parfit views ‘identity’ as potentially dissipated and plural over time. What we value and pursue now, for example, may be very different to what we valued and pursued in our distant past, and what we will value in the future, especially the long-term future (and see Stocker, 1997).

However, even if we give some credence to Parfit’s account, measurements and evaluations concerning a person’s well-being and how well ‘her’ life is going overall is much more difficult

to assess as a result. So, many philosophical conceptions of well-being rely on the exercise of individual agency, where a person who is able to devise plans for herself and implement them is likely to increase her well-being (for example, see Griffin, 1988; Raz, 1988; Sumner, 1999; Haybron, 2008; Tiberius, 2008; and my arguments in Smith, 2013). Individual agency, for many though, necessarily involves a capacity to devise and execute plans *across* a whole life. Here, the ‘further fact’ of a singular identity provides the coherency and continuity to one person’s narrative, where she views herself as ‘*the* author’ of her life, despite her changing psychological and experiential landscapes across time. Whereas, following Parfit’s reductionism, not assuming this ‘further fact’ risks undermining this person’s ability to act as ‘an author’ of her life, given that her personal identity is not constant but multiple and ambiguous (and see Korsegaard’s criticism of Parfit, 1989; Blackburn, 1997). This inability, in turn, risks diminishing her overall well-being, if enhancing a person’s well-being is conceptualised as including the capacity to successfully implement long-term plans that this person considers valuable to pursue over time and across the whole of her life.

Moreover, if personhood is identified as a singular irreducible entity occurring separately to her changing psychological and experiential make-up, then a person’s life can be more straightforwardly evaluated as a whole concerning her *overall* well-being. Evaluations and comparisons are easier to make when there is only one ‘identity target’ and one neutral ‘temporal weighting’ taking place across time. For example, long-term strategies for policy can be implemented more readily if it is assumed that persons are the same beneficiaries over time, thus providing a more coherent justification for policies which may require some pain now, anticipating that the present generation’s future long-term interests will be enhanced.

To summarise so far, then, we seem to be facing an uncomfortable choice or dilemma. We either accept the non-reductionist classical liberal account of temporal neutrality and the pursuit of rational self-interest, ignoring the problems Parfit highlights concerning our bias attitudes toward time which seem highly plausible. Or, we accept Parfit's objection and abandon key aspects of the more straightforwardly applicable non-reductionist accounts of well-being just outlined, which also seems plausible. There is, though, another response – namely, to resist choosing between an either/or understanding of identity and well-being, and instead offer a more hybrid view, combining both perspectives but recognising these also conflict philosophically, and when applied to social policy and welfare practice.

IV. THE 'HYBRID RESPONSE' AND SOCIAL POLICY

The main claim is that the hybrid view is consistent with our common intuitions about living a life well, and many contemporary philosophical accounts of well-being. On the reductionist side, a person who is unreflectively absorbed in a presently-lived satisfying activity, often experiences well-being enhancement. For example, Valerie Tiberius (2008, pp 74-75) and Daniel Haybron (2008, pp 115-117) argue that living in 'the present' can enhance a person's well-being and happiness. So, according to Tiberius:

... if the values that constitute a good life are many, we must be able to take different practical perspectives at different times. Sometimes we should be focused on friendship, sometimes absorbed by our careers, and sometimes overwhelmed by the

beauty of nature ... ‘Being in the moment’, although now a cliché, has much to recommend it. (Tiberius, 2008, p 75).

More abstractly, Gereon Kopf (2002, pp 224-45) explores how ‘the present’ can be experienced as ‘eternal’ with no temporal dimension if a person is unreflectively absorbed in her present activities. The point here is that a person’s identity, occurring separately to her subjective experiences as a further irreducible fact (underpinning the non-reductionist view), does not fit so readily with this account. For example, if she is utterly absorbed in her presently-orientated experiences, then she is less able to be temporally neutral, reflecting Parfit’s reductionism. This is because her identity is so embedded in the subjectively experienced present that she will have little or no objective regard for her future or her past.

However, at other times, she may break away from her subjectively absorbed world, to gain a wider more objective perspective, enabling her to have ‘attentional flexibility’ as Tiberius calls it – where she can consider the possibility of having new experiences via the judgements she makes about her life overall (Tiberius, 2008, pp 65-88). For Tiberius:

To have attentional flexibility, then, is to be open to considerations that are not the focus of our current practical perspective and to be able to make judgments on the basis of these considerations about our current perspective. (Tiberius, 2008, p 83).

The point here is that when this attentional flexibility occurs a person can view herself more objectively or impartially, in effect assuming the non-reducible identity of a singular agent,

functioning as ‘the author’ of her overall life-plans. Christine Korsgaard objects to Parfit’s reductionism on precisely these grounds, arguing, from a Kantian viewpoint, that it is important for our identities (and by implication our well-being) that we consider ourselves as authors of our lives (Korsgaard, 1989; and see Blackburn, 1997; for a Parfitian counter-argument to Korsgaard, see Shoemaker, 1996).

In summary, then, promoting the hybrid view resists an oversimplified choice – between the non-reductionist view of agency, self-interest, and temporal neutrality; or the reductionist view, having a bias towards the present and near future, over the past and distant future. So, how can this hybrid view be applied to social policy – particularly to pensions and disability policy?

Policy debate over pensions typically focus on the problems governments have persuading younger workers to invest in their futures, given their present preferences which do not regard this investment as important (Foster, 2010; Evandrou and Falkingham, 2009; Pettigrew et al, 2007). Following the arguments here, there is a conflict, therefore, between policy-makers who are trying to promote long-term self-interest and temporal neutrality amongst younger workers – and the non-neutral temporal attitudes of these younger people who are absorbed in the present. Policy-makers argue, subsequently, that young people acting in their self-interest should have a neutral attitude to time, and so view their future selves as having the same importance as their present selves, and act prudently – thereby furthering their long-term self-interest and well-being for their lives overall.

However, the hybrid view would regard temporal neutrality as only part of the story. So, acknowledging Parfit's criticisms, policy-makers from this viewpoint should not regard the inability of young people to save for their pensions as *merely* reflecting an irrational disregard for their future selves and well-being. Rather, it also reflects an appropriate bias toward the present, consistent with the kinds of creatures we all are, young or old. Therefore, the pursuit of rationality and self-interest are rightly made relevant to our lives as these are lived now, recognising that this absorbed focus on the present can enhance our well-being. If a young person, subsequently, becomes absorbed in her present experiences, she will often enhance her well-being and, *rationally*, will, as a result, refuse to become preoccupied with her long-term future interests (Shoemaker, 1997; Tiberius, 2008, p 75; Haybron, 2008, pp 115-117; Parfit, 1987, pp 313-314).

Moreover, having this presently orientated bias also reveals, more abstractly, how we are profoundly limited by beginnings and ends, or our finiteness (and see my arguments in Smith, 2011, 2013). For example, we are constrained by our social and physical environments, our inability to be in two places simultaneously, to be more than one person at a time, as well as our inability to imagine with complete accuracy what our personal identities will be like in the long-term future. These limitations are universal, applying to us all whether young or old, where we often are not in full control of our circumstances, and will have incomplete information when making decisions about our futures. Regarding pension policy, it is important to acknowledge that these limitations also make us vulnerable to harm, disappointment, failure, conflicting choices, and error, when calculating what is in our best interest to pursue, and especially concerning our long-term futures (and see Sobel, 1994). The broad recommendation here, then,

is that this vulnerability should be accommodated for in pension policy, where mechanisms should be implemented to ensure that the long-term future well-being of vulnerable populations are protected (Foster, 2010; Goodin, 1985, 1988). This protection will also allow a young person to rationally pursue her interests now without being overly concerned about her future (reflecting the reductionist view), but still also be secure knowing that her long-term future interests are not being neglected (reflecting the non-reductionist view). Of course, the hybrid response recognises that these views conflict. However, by placing the onus of responsibility on governments through collective provision to meet the legitimate temporally neutral demands of non-reductionism, it allows all younger individual workers, and especially including those who will be most vulnerable as pensioners, to be biased toward their present lives, consistent with reductionism.

Turning to disability policy, I have argued elsewhere the important role that the value of individual agency plays, not only in contemporary accounts of well-being, but also within the disability rights movement and its promotion of the social model of disability (Smith, 2011, p 131-152, 2013). So again reflecting the non-reductionist view of identity, a disabled person may see herself as possessing a singular and determinate identity, existing as an objective ‘further fact’ behind presently experienced physical and/or psychological circumstances and relations. The point here is that her identity as a person *first*, that is, as an objective further fact occurring separately to her experiences of impairment, then allows for a critique of the medical model – which is a model that is seen as mistakenly reducing ‘the disabled person’ to a set of characteristics associated with medical ‘dysfunction’ and ‘abnormality’. This radical process of ‘objectification’ (as it can now be called), renders classical liberal accounts of self-interest more

plausible, despite Parfit's criticisms. Temporally neutral self-reflective judgements are made by a disabled person concerning her life-plans over time, and contribute to her well-being enhancement, because she is now viewed as 'the author' of her life in exactly the same way as a non-disabled person; her physical and psychological characteristics having no bearing at all on this 'further fact' of authorship (also see my arguments about these Kantian implications of *some* aspects of the disability movement's position in Smith, 2005b).

Moreover, for the disability movement, social expectations, reflecting the medical model, often mistakenly single out only disabled people as 'limited' and so leading lives of 'lesser' value than non-disabled people. Whereas, the social model views impairment as signifying restrictions in certain respects, but also as life-enhancing in others (Morris, 1991; Swain, French, and Cameron, 2003; and Smith, 2001, 2009, 2011). The point here is that social policy and welfare practice should ensure the full expression of the latter view, where the training of welfare practitioners, for example, would assume that value is brought to a person's life often *because* and not despite of her impairment. Therefore, instead of a practitioner administering 'care' to the 'unfortunate victim' or 'tragically disabled', she would be open to learning from the personal experience of the disabled person she is caring for. That is, assuming the life led by an impaired service-user can be a positive one which contributes to her well-being and the life of others (Morris, 1991; Kittay, 2005, 1999).

However, difficult questions concerning how we understand and promote well-being within disability care are thrown into sharp relief as a result, and have a profound bearing on how the hybrid view is understood and promoted. For example, to what degree should a welfare

practitioner accommodate for the present cognitive perspective of a disabled person in her care, given it is held by the service-user now? Or, to what degree should a welfare practitioner assume an impartial or temporary neutral perspective, which may go against the present perspective of the service-user? The point here is that recognising the presently-orientated bias of the service-user, which may enhance presently occurring subjective well-being reflecting the reductionist view (and see Eid and Larson, 2008), may nevertheless conflict with the need for change and the possession of enhanced objective capacities for the service-user in the future – that, if implemented, would also enhance a person’s long-term well-being (and see Nussbaum, 2011, 2006). The broader recommendation from the arguments presented in this chapter is that *holding* these conflicts as necessary tensions, is integral to how well-being, disability, and effective welfare practice is understood, across the various trajectories – actual *and* potential – of a disabled person’s life. The practitioner must therefore manage the difficult balance of taking seriously the proposition that a life presently lived by a disabled person is worthwhile and valuable, not despite, but often because of their impairment, but also implement a future set of possibilities for the disabled person which expands this person’s choices, opportunities, and agency, so enhancing their long-term future well-being.

V. CONCLUSION

As finite creatures we are all subjectively limited. But this gives shape to our lives, and, paradoxically, enables us to enjoy our lives as we become positively immersed ‘in the moment’ and ‘who we are now’. For contemporary commentators on well-being, and consistent with Parfit’s reductionism, we can also become better “engaged” with our lives (Haybron, pp 114-115) – whole-heartedly committing to what we presently aim for and seek to accomplish, so

enhancing our well-being. This enhancement occurs because we can be satisfied with our achievements now, but with these achievements reflecting our present temporally bounded identities and biases.

However, on other occasions we are more objectively reflective and so will maintain a more temporally neutral or impartial view of our lives. For example, when ensuring our long-term interests are protected we implement plans now to enhance our long-term future capabilities for well-being enhancement. This future-orientated implementation strategy readily reflects a non-reductionist view of identity, which assumes a “further fact” of a constant and unchanging identity occurring separately to changing circumstances, experiences and psychological relations, and so existing as a singular determinate entity across time. The point here is that maintaining this temporal neutrality and impartiality can lead to conflicts within a person, between fulfilling present aims, so remaining ‘authentic’ and ‘true to herself’ now (reflecting the reductionist view) – but also, simultaneously, imagining new possibilities for her future which could be undermined if all these present aims are now met (reflecting the non-reductionist view; and see Sumner, 1999; Brink, 2003). Recognising this conflict and the resulting dilemmas underpins the hybrid view which combines reductionism and non-reductionism, and, it is argued here, is essential for understanding how best to develop social policies and welfare practices. The main conclusion is that when this conflict *within* persons is extended to populations and groups, social policy and welfare practice dilemmas are also produced concerning, not only how individual agency is exercised presently, but also how well-being is enhanced over generations and across communities. In short, the problem is how to manage these conflicts and tensions while resisting the temptation to ‘dissolve’ them.

Finally, following from the above, we can see that all our lives, whatever our social and other circumstances, are often led in complex and multi-layered ways, where many aspects of our well-being are not merely subjectively experiential, so occurring in the here-and-now, but also contains objective or impartial elements which then may facilitate appropriate attitudes of temporal neutrality. However, this pull toward temporal neutrality, despite our present orientated bias, refers not only to one person's life where, contra Parfit, she treats her identity as a 'further fact' making herself the sole beneficiary of decisions made as the author of her life. It also can facilitate a neutral attitude *between* persons where a person considers her own interests as being equally weighted to others within any given community. This then leads to other questions concerning the interplay between these subjective and objective viewpoints or perspectives. For example, I have argued elsewhere (for example, see Smith, 2005a, 2011, pp 83-106), that we often subjectively experience 'other regarding' emotions such as compassion for another's suffering, but which prompts us, more objectively and impartially, to imagine the life of others as being equally important to our own (and see Nagel, 1989). Given these latter demands of impartiality and objectivity within these wider social contexts, good reasons are often provided for policies that redistribute resources from the better-off to the worst-off, to rectify inequalities and enhance well-being for everyone.

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