

An I for an I Leaves the Whole World Blind: The Neo-Kantian against Derek Parfit's Personal Identity Reductionism

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I. Introduction

Derek Parfit believes that there is nothing more to a person than the physical elements that compose her. In fact, his reductionist view of the self, first outlined in *Reasons and Persons* in 1984, hoped to have the final word on the metaphysics of personhood. His claims were both controversial and ambitious; his rejection of a traditionally Western, robust sense of personhood grounded his broader ethical project of dismissing self-interest theories as incoherent. While the Oxford philosopher has been lauded for his work, his proposed reductionism has come under heavy fire. This paper examines one such instance, namely Quassim Cassam's neo-Kantian argument for a robust view of selfhood first expounded in *Kant and Reductionism*, and then more forcefully argued for in *Parfit on Persons*.

Parfit's contemporary bundle theory understands the self to be like nations—both are valid concepts in themselves, and both are composed of nothing more than a collection of specific facts. As such, personal identity is not what matters, and we should adjust towards an impersonal

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ethics—that is, an ethics that considers others to be equally important or more important than one's future self. However, Cassam argued that in order to acquire and maintain certain types of knowledge, the self must be metaphysically thick, such that we can maintain unity of consciousness. Part of his reasoning seemed to have convinced Parfit, who forfeited some of his stronger claims about selfhood, thereby ending the debate. However, in *The New neo-Kantian Debate with Reductionism*, Kathy Behrendt convincingly demonstrated that Parfit's modified reductionism is still very much at odds with Cassam's Kantian view. This paper builds upon Behrendt's position: first, I explain Parfitian Reductionism and its problematic stature with Cassam. Second, I show that the tentative solution proposed by Parfit (and accepted by Cassam) is inadequate for the neo-Kantian. Finally, I argue that for Parfit's modified reductionism to hold, one must construct identity thickly—an inadmissible position to the reductionist. As such, I hope to strengthen the neo-Kantian position against the reductionist.

II. Deconstructing Parfit's Reductionism

In *Reasons and Persons*, Derek Parfit is mostly concerned with ethics and rationality: he views self-interest theories—broadly, the view that an agent's action is rational if and only if it promotes her interests—to be misguided and inconsistent. Instead, a proper view of personal identity justifies impersonal ethics, where greater altruism is either permissible or required. Thus, Parfit's project considerably hinges on his reductionist view of selfhood. His main thesis is that *personal identity is not what really matters* (Parfit 245). Rather, a looser form of 'identity' holds true, which he defends by drawing from the contemporary sciences. In this, it is a very modern view of personal identity, as materialism is assumed across the board. Before deconstructing his claims, however, it is helpful to understand its opposing views. Traditionally, non-reductionism is cashed out as substance dualism, famously propounded by René Descartes. On this view, the self is a purely idealist and spiritual substance existing beyond the brain and body. Descartes thought that this immanent substance existed in a non-physical realm, and interacted with the body through the pineal gland. While most academic circles will find this claim doubtful—habituated as we are by the narratives and discoveries of modern sciences—non-reductionism is not limited to Cartesian dualism; any theory that holds the self to be a further *fact*, above and beyond one's brain and body, is non-reductionist. In light of this distinction, we can propose a first definition of reductionism:

[1] “That the fact of a person’s identity over time just consists in the holding of certain more particular facts.”
(Parfit 210)

This definition permits more or less narrow reductionist positions. For instance, one could make the strong claim that a person is *just* a certain brain in a certain body that experiences certain mental events (an epiphenomenalist, for instance). Another—and this is closer to Parfit’s view—can claim that a person is *distinct* but not *separate* from a brain and body (Parfit 209). We should understand the difference between ‘separate’ and ‘distinct’ here as the difference between ontological and conceptual units. Ontological units are of an inherently different nature, while conceptual units are the consequence of our forms of speech and thought. If the self were separate from the physical realm, we arrive at substance dualism. Because Parfit holds that persons are ‘conceptually distinct,’ he can salvage materialism by claiming that the self exists through speech, but is still only composed of physical facts. His analogy to nations supports this interpretation: a nation is constituted of a set of individuals (more particular facts) but can be conceptualized as a distinct entity (Parfit 212). This distinction will play a central role in Parfit’s disagreement with Cassam. For now, what matters is that we can draw a second definition from [1]:

[2] “that [the fact of a person’s identity] can be described without either presupposing the identity of this person, or explicitly claiming that the experiences of 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.” (Parfit 210)

If [1] is accepted, then [2] presumably follows: if one were to understand all the facts about one’s existence as a person, one could disassociate oneself of one’s subjectivity and list these facts from an external viewpoint; the possibility of an external description is congruent with the reductive constituency of a person. However, [2] can be unpacked further, as Parfit is claiming two similar but separate things. We have:

The Non-Presupposition Claim [NP]: That one does not need to presuppose the existence of a person to describe the facts of this person’s identity. (Behrendt 335)

The Impersonal Description claim [ID]: That one’s identity consists in facts that can be described impersonally, i.e. without positing the existence of this person. (Behrendt 335)

The ID claim is stronger than the NP claim: on the one hand, to not presuppose the existence of a person does not preclude a person not existing at all, and one is still free to use the concept of a person truthfully. A person's identity can first be considered as a bundle of existentially prior facts, which can later give rise to the concept of 'self.' ID, on the other hand, carries a more normative component; if it is possible to eliminate the concept of a person in providing an accurate description of reality, one *should* subscribe to this impersonal description; if personhood is ontologically and causally unnecessary, it is therefore disposable.

III. Cassam's Kantian argument

Cassam argues that the ID claim is untenable on epistemic grounds: it is inconsistent with the assumptions that the world is mind-independent and that we have the capacity to gain knowledge about it (Cassam 90). Since Parfit is at least implicitly committed to realism—the possibility of a neutral or objective perspective entails that the world at least could exist without us—this puts his view in jeopardy if Cassam's charges are justified (Cassam 102–104).

Cassam argues that Kant's 'Transcendental Deduction' in the *Critique of Pure Reason* suggests that a necessary knowledge condition, if we are to consider the world to be objective in any meaningful way, is to have unity of consciousness (Cassam 86–87). This entails that there are subjects of experience to whom we attach this consciousness, and the self becomes a bearer of knowledge. The neo-Kantian, against Parfit, wants to say that a *complete* description of the world cannot omit the self because self-ascribing thoughts are necessary to an accurate picture of reality. Specifically, Cassam holds that: "the existence of subjects ... play[s] a crucial role in the explanation of the unity of consciousness, and in the patterns of the reasoning required to sustain the idea of experience of spatial objects" (Cassam 102). The argument for unity of consciousness then proceeds in two steps.

First, the neo-Kantian holds that for knowledge to be possible, unity of consciousness needs to anchor perceptions to produce a stable epistemic framework. This is especially important for the re-identification of numerically identical objects; to sustain knowledge about spatial objects, we must successfully differentiate between qualitative and numerical identity. Without this condition, qualitative and numerical identity collapse and we are left with fleeting perceptions that can't be properly abstracted into knowledge. But if we accept unity of consciousness, the classification of experiential information into objects of knowledge can now take place by attaching experience to different (possibly qualitatively identical) spatial

objects. There needs to be a fixed variable which can process and discriminate experiential information. In Kantian terms, the move from intuitions to synthetic apperceptions takes place when our faculty of understanding considers these intuitions as belonging to a numerically identical consciousness through time; we must *assume* subjective unity of consciousness to conceptualize ourselves as tracing a route through an objective world.

Second, the Kantian self is a sufficient (but not necessary) condition to give rise to unity of consciousness. Our rational faculty abstracts from the perceptual world to produce the self, both contained within the world and separate from it. It is not enough to say that there is a consciousness that makes its way through the world; indeed, this would justify the reductionist's impersonal description thesis, and leave enough room for the theorist to deny the existence of enduring objective objects against our desire for epistemic stability stated above. If we make reference to and quantify over an agent, we maintain unity of consciousness such that the knowledge condition above is respected. In effect, we need personal identity or a similar concept to be ontologically valid in order to sustain the claim of an objective world that is epistemologically accessible.

One might complain at this point that Cassam's argument is forcing us to choose between two extremes: Kantian transcendental idealism or deflationary reductionism. However, Cassam argues only for the necessity of *something like* the Kantian self. What is important is unity of consciousness, which entails an epistemic agent. The details about this agent and the metaphysical narrative we attach to her are open to further specification.

With the objectivity-requires-unity argument, the neo-Kantian is at odds with the ID claim. She urges the reductionist to accept that quantification over people is a necessary part of the description of reality. In fact, for Cassam, the problematic aspect of Parfit's view is that it is covertly eliminativist: ID entails that selfhood is empty of causal power—it can and should be barred from our conceptual scheme. While Parfit believes that 'persons' are factually part of our linguistic practice, he is clear in saying that the way we talk is incidental (Parfit 267); there is no essential or inherent component to our manners of speech. When it comes to 'self,' we *ought* to progress towards linguistic schemes that don't include strong claims of personal identity. There must be a *deepening* of the meaning that personal identity carries for the neo-Kantian to be satisfied (Behrendt 339).

IV. A middle ground?

Parfit, presented with Cassam's argument, seems to have been convinced of the problematic status of ID (Behrendt 341). Specifically, he

was convinced by Cassam's later argument that a true description of the objective world requires *I-thoughts*, a particular type of mental event to be relativized to a person to hold true; the truth-conditions of the existence of a particular *I-thought* cannot be fully specified without making reference to who this thought is quantified over, thus making the concept of persons ontologically necessary. In light of this, there now seems to be the possibility of a middle ground, as the scope of the debate was limited to Impersonal Description. What is now left is [1] and part of [2]: that a person consists of more particular facts, and that we needn't presuppose personal identity to describe those facts. This is consistent with neo-Kantianism as the view isn't committed to any type of idealism or dualism. Cassam agrees that a person is considered as a distinct but not separate entity, and the claim that one must not presuppose the concept of a person to describe a person does not, according to him, conflict with the objectivity-requires-unity argument. This is because it doesn't exclude the possibility of people as bearers of thought and subjects of experience.

This is favorable to Parfit; his reductionism does not depend in any crucial way on the ID claim. Indeed, what reductionism is most committed to is the understanding that personhood is comprised of more particular facts. In particular, for Parfit, the R-relation—psychological connectedness and/or physical continuity (co-connectedness)—is the best description of the progression of our physical and mental lives through time. The R-relation depends on the NP claim: co-connectedness is a subset of the set of particular facts of one's mind and body, which is supported by the validity of the NP claim. In other words, NP is required for the R-relation to be possible. Once that is granted, it is a short step for Parfit to argue that co-connectedness is the best explanation we have.

The ID claim does not necessarily follow from [1] or NP (Parfit 210–215; Behrendt 336), and is thus dispensable. The R-relation does not significantly rely on it either, and Parfit shouldn't be worried about discarding it—his reductionism is still robust enough to ground his impersonal ethical project. Indeed, he defends his impersonal ethics by claiming that since co-connectedness is true, we are psychologically connected to our future selves to a much lesser degree than self-interest theories hold. Consequently, we shouldn't consider our later selves to outweigh temporally proximate others in our moral calculus, and greater altruism is now rationally justified.

It seems the debate has come to a close, as Cassam is satisfied with denying Parfit the ID claim, and Parfit is content in keeping the bulk of his structure intact. Unfortunately, that is too good to be true. The catch, Behrendt points out, is that in discarding the ID claim, Parfit doesn't meaningfully deepen his notion of personhood to cater to the neo-Kantian

demand of an epistemic agent. To quote Behrendt, “Parfit is able to agree that persons exist and are not eliminable from descriptions of reality, not because he has (now) a more rigorous notion of persons, but because he has a relaxed notion of existence” (Behrendt 339). The neo-Kantian’s demand of deepening the meaning of a self is not really granted, as it doesn’t necessarily follow that allowing persons to exist leads to construing them as having enough metaphysical weight. To use Parfit’s example, it would be wrong not to admit the existence of constellations or nations, but that doesn’t mean that they have any kind of primacy or privileged status over and above their constituent parts (Parfit 489).

Some of Parfit’s subsequent work demonstrates that he never really departed from the view expounded in the ID claim. This supports Behrendt in saying that indeed, the debate is not closed between the neo-Kantian and the reductionist. In *Experiences, Subjects, and Conceptual Schemes*, Parfit presents a thought-experiment which states that if there existed a world populated by beings without a proper notion of personal identity, such that the world was described and operated on purely impersonal terms (and instead all that held was something along the lines of an R-relation), this world would be “no metaphysically or scientifically worse than ours,” or INW (Impersonal No Worse) (Parfit 221). He uses this thought-experiment to illustrate our deeply engrained tendencies of using notions like the self and I, both in discourse and in everyday behavior. Parfit calls these terms illusory, as they carry no real truth. Moreover, the fact, he says, that the INW world is no worse than ours points to the fact that we *should* in fact try to rid ourselves of the linguistic usage of ‘persons.’ It is clear that the neo-Kantian, presented with INW, shouldn’t be satisfied with Parfit discarding the ID claim as it has been replaced by a broader claim of the same nature (broader as its scope includes non-humans) (Behrendt 344–345). Therefore, the objectivity-requires-unity argument is in tension with the INW thought-experiment, and the debate remains between the neo-Kantian and the reductionist.

V. The problem with Impersonal No Worse

So far, I hope to have established that there remains an insoluble tension between the neo-Kantian and the reductionist on the issue of the necessary existence of an epistemic agent. This agent, on the neo-Kantian view, should be metaphysically robust—the necessary condition to maintaining a mind-independent world and the means to acquiring knowledge about it. Parfit, in presenting a renewed version of the ID claim with the INW world, is at odds with the neo-Kantian. In addition, he claims that

this world is in fact conceivable, and that this ought to motivate one to try to rid oneself of 'identity-tendencies'—behavioral and mental habits about personhood which are merely illusions. As the neo-Kantian has already established *how* a subjective agent is to maintain epistemic accessibility to the exterior world by means of the objectivity-requires-unity argument, the burden of proof lies on Parfit to show that the INW world is in fact first conceivable. More importantly, he must then demonstrate that the beings of INW are similar enough to humans to justify his claim that personal identity doesn't matter; if INW turns out to be no worse than our world, we would have reason to side with Parfit. In the following section, I advance the view that for INW to be both attainable and no worse than our world, there must exist within that world a concept of unity that can replace our thick view of personhood without significant loss of meaning. Therefore, if I am correct, Parfit's thought-experiment backfires and supports the existence of an epistemic agent that the neo-Kantian would construe.

First, I propose to build a function which tracks the gradual shift in our 'identity-tendencies' as it moves towards INW, such that we start with our current world and finish with a world that doesn't contain any identity-tendencies. One possible—and I believe effective—way to track this gradual change is through language. Indeed, language significantly reflects the existence and non-existence of different concepts that we share; mental events are largely analyzable through speech and it is natural to correlate their existence with their instantiation in language. For instance, if one does not talk of the self anymore, there is reason to say that its concept no longer properly exists in our minds. Moreover, it provides a quantifiable framework by which one can view the progression of the function; as it progresses, I-locutions are removed bit by bit. This is quite similar to Parfit's own famous thought experiment, where the indeterminate state of identity between oneself and someone else is projected onto a spectrum. I propose the same thing here: a spectrum is projected between our current linguistic paradigm and the purported INW language.

This framework is built to answer this question: are the beings of INW similar enough to us for INW to be attainable? If this experiment were actually set up, the hope would be either that once one reaches a certain point on the spectrum (has eliminated enough I-locutions), meaning one is denatured enough to be significantly dissimilar to humans, or that this point is never reached and the complete elimination of identity-tendencies doesn't affect our humanity. The former situation would disprove Parfit, while the latter would justify him.

However, this thought-experiment runs into much of the same difficulties that beset Parfit's own identity-spectrum. The heap paradox looms overhead; there isn't a determinate and clear border between

possessing enough of a human language (if a human language is to include talk of self) and losing that characteristic trait. It is equally acceptable to point to different areas of the spectrum as this border because no one point will be different enough from its neighbors to justify that we ascribe it more weight. Therefore, perhaps an answer similar to Parfit's is correct: one could argue that by slowly eliminating I-locutions, one knows all the significant facts about the subject. Determining her nature is an *empty* question as it comes down to choosing between several equally consistent descriptions of the same state of affairs. If this is indeed a viable answer, then the thought-experiment looks to favor Parfit. The language-function would illustrate the indeterminate state of our conceptualization of identity, and our humanity wouldn't rest in any fundamental way on our linguistic habits. This would warrant the claim that one ought to move along this spectrum towards INW, as the Reductionist has shown that the R-relation is more consistent with the facts of our reality.

I believe this is too hasty a conclusion. Indeed, there is an additional dimension one must add to the language-function for it to work adequately: as I-locutions are gradually erased, the function must continually evaluate if the metaphysical and epistemological framework reflected by the language remains satisfactory. This follows from Parfit's claim that the INW world is *no metaphysically or scientifically worse* than ours. This means that the metaphysical system present in INW can accomplish the same tasks it does here. Since our metaphysics include an epistemological component, INW must deal with how we acquire knowledge; our epistemology is significantly reflected in the shapes and forms of our language: language provides the means necessary for acquiring and communicating forms of knowledge. Moreover, epistemic pursuits (e.g. scientific practice) are grounded in our capacity to express certain things, thereby making knowledge publicly available. This can be expressed as the 'public component of knowledge.' The public component of language is required for our epistemic framework to remain effective. Thus, the language-function should evaluate if, at any point, the language contains the required apparatus to sustain the details of our epistemology.

This evaluation, as before, is rather indeterminate: there is no clear way in evaluating one point on the spectrum as being significantly different from the following or preceding point. However, we know that the function converges towards an ideal state of affairs where language contains *no* identity-tendencies. I propose that we evaluate that specific state of affairs for an adequate epistemic framework; whatever we find, we can then confidently assert that the spectrum converges towards that epistemic framework as well. Two conditions must be met for INW to be sound:

- (a) there must be no I-locutions present in one's language, and;
- (b) this state of affairs must be no metaphysically or scientifically worse than ours.

Thus, this inhabitant of INW—let's call her Alice—must be endowed with enough of a mental apparatus to *ascertain knowledge about the exterior world*. This follows both from Parfit's implicit commitment to realism and condition (b) of INW. Alice's apparatus, in our case, is reflected in her available linguistic concepts.

I argue that it is crucial for Alice to recognize numerically identical objects through time for INW to function. This entails a conceptual unity about how she formalizes and categorizes these objects. In turn, this unity extends to oneself, thereby forming a *self-aware* unit of experience. Self-awareness is a necessary condition to our epistemology getting off the ground. Therefore, I conclude that INW must contain a unit-concept no less meaningful than our 'self' for epistemic conditions to remain no worse across both worlds.

First, to assert the existence of an unchanging object through space and time, its properties must appear to us stable through space and time. For instance, if we want to say something about a half-eaten cookie, then the property of being half-eaten must appear to be consistent from time T1 to T2. Once we've asserted something about the cookie, the statement becomes truth-conditional and subject to epistemic concern. For a statement about an object O1 to be possible, then, we must group its properties into a conceptual drawer together. This grouping does not have to be ontologically or logically prior to the properties of the group. Rather, what matters is that putting certain properties in the same drawer creates a meaningful unit that can be epistemically accessed. Only then can Alice lament her half-eaten cookie and angrily find whoever's responsible. Our language about objects translates well to INW, as the property of 'self' doesn't properly belong to inanimate objects. Alice, in INW, would parse out meaningful units (objects) from a sentence and her knowledge of these things wouldn't be affected by the lack of I-locutions. However, we quickly run into problems when dealing with the notion of 'persons.' We can first approach the issue functionally: Alice presumably wants to do something about her cookie, and to do so she will interact with other people. To express her beliefs and knowledge, her language will include other inhabitants of INW. She needn't view another person differently than O1; a 'person' is a bundle of properties organized in the same knowledge-drawer, such that she has access to linguistic terms that refer. The only difference is that the other person functionally seems to have a similar use of language

and a similar epistemic framework. To interact effectively—that is, no worse than our own world—Alice will need a way to fulfill the public component of knowledge by referring to this other person. But this interaction is reflexive; Alice’s friend will want to refer to her the same way she refers to him—intersubjectivity, or ascribing self-awareness to each other, naturally arises in and through language. For INW’s language to provide enough linguistic machinery, something similar to the ‘I’ needs to exist; a self-aware ‘unit-self’ that will be used in communicating beliefs about the world. Thus, for our language to remain epistemically effective in INW, reference to ‘oneself’ inexorably arises. Therefore, without proper I-locutions, the public component of our knowledge will be stripped of something, and INW will not fulfill its promise.

The reductionist can contend that we are begging the question here: we are assuming that these I-locutions in INW refer to a metaphysically thick self similar to what we have now. Why not replace all I-locutions with a language supporting the R-relation? Indeed, what matters, the reductionist could say, is that we preserve the means to access and communicate our knowledge; the R-relation, while maybe requiring more convoluted language, accomplishes this without problem. Alice will still be able to function properly. What’s more, the added linguistic complication is a small price to pay to have a better view of the self and a better ethical vision. In other words, there is nothing *essential* about I-locutions, such that INW indeed preserves an adequate epistemic system, against the Kantian.

This is a fair objection and the functionality argument is weaker than hoped. Instead, we must provide reasons for the essential epistemic nature of linguistic expressions of ‘self.’ If this is possible, identity-tendencies expressed through speech will be inextricably tied to our humanity. Unfortunately, we risk returning to square one of the disagreement between the Kantian and the reductionist; the Kantian will hold that through the synthesis of experience to apperception (higher order conceptualization), the self emerges as a useful abstraction, and the reductionist will reply that such a construct isn’t necessary to our ontology, that we have a more factual description available. Both camps are talking past each other. The goal of the language-function I have proposed was to sidestep this by illustrating the functional importance of I-locutions. But if the reductionist presses and demands foundational arguments—asking *why* exactly we are so attached to personhood—then we return to a narrative similar to Kant’s.

Nevertheless, I believe that our language-function can illustrate one last thing: I-locutions provide a more robust, richer framework to describe higher-order phenomena (e.g. emotions) about our lives than could co-connectedness. While I cannot claim that the self is an essential metaphysical entity, I do hold that it is a robust construct that carries

epistemic weight with ease. Consider that throughout the formation of knowledge, from experience to mental phenomena to thoughts and beliefs, introspection is often present. While often implicit, the act of analyzing one's interior mental life and sorting through one's thoughts and experiences translates to forming beliefs about the world. What's more, introspection leads to discarding some mental events and keeping others; it leads to choosing what matters to oneself. This creates two levels to one's mental life: the chaotic world of 'pre-processed' information and the 'higher-order' level that carries with it knowledge and beliefs. A thick concept of self coincides with the higher-order level, and it allows us to describe ourselves more thoroughly than if we only had co-connectedness as the R-relation conflates the self with all of our physical and mental facts. Thus, we lose part of the description of ourselves that we could provide with selfhood. More importantly, this has a bearing on how we form knowledge: if we let go of beliefs about personhood, then it will be much more difficult to sort through the facts that compose us in order to *choose* what ought to matter and inform our epistemology. INW-Alice will struggle without the same ability to introspect, adding things to the 'self' drawer and discarding others. It won't be impossible, only less elegant and more arduous. There isn't anything necessary about I-locutions; they simply offer a richer description of the reality that we inhabit. If we must choose between languages, we ought to choose the one that expands the limits of what is possible to think and talk about.

VI. Conclusion

My goal is to have weakened the INW thought-experiment such that we now have less reason to accept Parfit's reductionist claims. We now return to the tension between the ID Claim and the neo-Kantian objectivity-requires-unity argument. If in fact Parfit is convinced by Cassam's arguments against ID, then he should revisit the INW thought experiment. If instead he is committed to claiming that we should let go of our identity-tendencies, he must deal with his problematic epistemic framework, or at least convincingly answer the concerns raised in this paper. Specifically, he must demonstrate that a description of our lives without identity-tendencies is as rich as our current mental and linguistic paradigms. This will be a difficult task: linguistic and mentalist usage of selfhood, on my view, provide simple and robust tools that gracefully shape our reality. In any case, the debate between the neo-Kantian and the reductionist is alive and well.

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