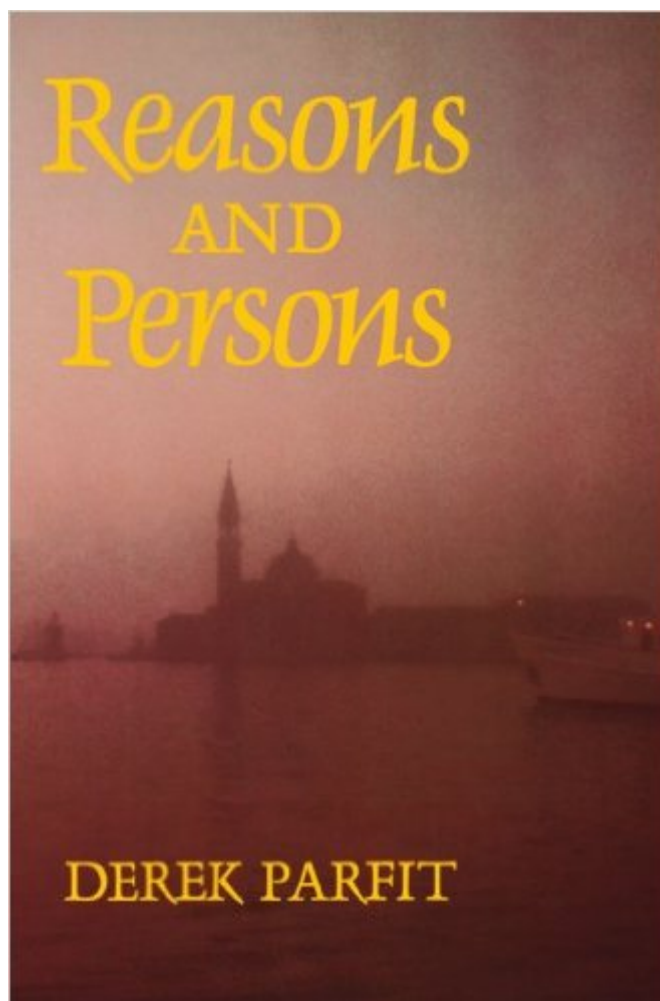


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# Reasons And Persons



## Synopsis

Challenging, with several powerful arguments, some of our deepest beliefs about rationality, morality, and personal identity, Derek Parfit claims that we have a false view about our own nature. It is often rational to act against our own best interests, he argues, and most of us have moral views that are self-defeating. We often act wrongly, although we know there will be no one with serious grounds for complaint, and when we consider future generations it is very hard to avoid conclusions that most of us will find very disturbing.

## Book Information

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"Very few works in the subject can compare with Parfit's in scope, fertility, imaginative resource, and cogency of reasoning."--P.F. Strawson, *The New York Review of Books*"Complex, brilliant, and entertaining....This book is chock-full of impressive arguments, many of which seem destined to become part of the standard analytic repertory....It is an understatement to say that it is well worth reading."--*International Studies in Philosophy*"Extraordinary...Brilliant...Astonishingly rich in ideas...A major contribution to philosophy: it will be read, honoured, and argued about for many years to come."--Samuel Scheffler, *Times Literary Supplement*"A brilliantly clever and imaginative book...Strange and excitingly intense."--Alan Ryan, *Sunday Times (London)*"Not many books reset the philosophical agenda in the way that this one does....Western philosophy, especially systematic ethics, will not be the same again."--*Philosophical Books*

Reasons and persons challenges, with several powerful arguments, some of our deepest beliefs

about rationality, morality, and personal identity.

I got this book hoping for insights on temporal metaphysics and found a cornucopia of ideas, analyses, and gedankenexperiments on the nature of personhood. The moral calculus of time and self is neatly laid out for exploration (do you have obligations to your past self?) A class of problems is deeply probed: whether and how you evaluate the moral desert of \*possible\* future people (do you do someone a favor by causing them to exist?) The first part of the book is a technical dissection of the ethical behavior theories of self interest and collective utility. It ties together with the rest of the book, but if that is not your bag I think you can pretty safely skip it. One stand out, for me, was the thorough destruction of theories of the Cartesian ego. It opened my eyes to the problems that idea has caused throughout history. (That is my realization, it is not in the book.) It did not seem long. An excellent read overall. The Kindle edition has about 10 typos, but in addition there is a fairly confusing typographical error in one of the appendices: a capital T is used instead of I in single quotes ('I'). Now you are warned, all of you who read 6 or 7 appendices in philosophy books. :)

A rigorously argued work of genius as it has proven to be in the philosophic community. Clearly, this is a book that is a fundamental read for students at the undergraduate and graduate level in all disciplines.

By coincidence I had thought of some of these ideas myself. Or, maybe I had browsed the book one time and forgot that I read it. In any case, as my friend Jen said, "this is what philosophy should always be like". There is plenty of interesting content on nearly every page. The main limitation might be that the concern is ostensibly primarily with moral and social questions, meaning that the logical importance of the text is not direct. However, it is clear that Parfit is not lying when he says that he has communicated with many of the famous philosophers of today. Although this is not my favorite book, it does things right, and I only regret that I did not acquire it sooner. Earlier in my process it would have been an invaluable asset in my thinking process. As it is now, I have already committed to a certain methodology, and had little confidence that anyone had done anything remotely similar. Highly recommended, inspired, idiosyncratic book that rarely slips up. And, as an added notation, the book dates from the 1980's, meaning it was ahead of its time, and in terms of quality, it is still.

Very rich discussion of fascinating thought experiments. One of the most interesting studies in the

theory of rational choice and of the theory of personal identity AND the relations between the two..

This was the first time I read such a dense philosophical book. Parfit is pretty good at producing reasoning and examples for his causes but there are some serious counterexamples to many of his claims. Good read though,

I bought this because Douglas Hofstadter referred to it in "I am a Strange Loop." I suppose certain philosophers might enjoy this kind of reading, but not me! I wondered if it would be possible to diagram the logical layout of Parfit's discussions, but I have better things to do with my time. From Hofstadter, I was really interested in the Parfit's "teleportation" thought experiments relating to consciousness, but got bogged down too early in the book to even get there; in fact, at this point I don't know if I've even got the right book!

The aim and result of "Reasons and Persons" may perhaps be best described as the dissolution of the idea of persons, at least as the term 'person' is ordinarily understood. Parfit wishes, partly in response to the impersonalism of modern life, to establish impersonalism in moral theory. But such impersonalism will in fact, Parfit maintains, make things go better for persons. The attack on persons is in two stages: as regards reasons for acting and as regards what it is to be a person at all (hence the title of the book). With respect to the first Parfit argues against the rationality of giving preference to oneself (the self-interest theory), as well as to one's nearest and dearest (common-sense morality, as Parfit describes it). Commonsense morality can fail because giving preference, say, to one's own children in regard to some good may make one's children's lives go worse than if one had behaved impartially (or impersonally). The self-interest theory can fail partly because one's life may go better if one is sometimes self-denying (though Parfit regards this as an indirect failure and not a decisive one), but also because what we want or value need not always be the same as our self-interest. We have other desires, such as to help other people or to achieve some ambition, which may be opposed to our self-interest. It is not irrational to prefer these instead. In other words the bias towards oneself and one's own is not necessarily the best or most rational state. Parfit's arguments (and there are others besides those mentioned) are in my view convincing, especially against the self-interest theory, and they are illustrated with numerous imaginative and instructive examples. I must, however, make one comment. In speaking of self interest, Parfit always contrasts it with the interest of others (e.g., it is said that helping others could be harmful to oneself). This is the ordinary way we speak of self interest. It is misleading, however, to say that the tradition we

have inherited counsels the pursuit of this sort of self interest (e.g., Parfit describes the Christian tradition as teaching this because it teaches morality for the sake of personal happiness hereafter). There is another and less vulgar sense of self-interest where it coincides with the interest of the other (cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. IX). The claim here is that one is better off if one lives not for oneself but for that which is more and other than oneself -- whether the city, friends or the god. Being human is being for the other, not for oneself. This will not, of course, affect Parfit's arguments against the vulgar sense of self interest, but it should make it less easy to accuse the tradition of teaching the same vulgarity. When it comes to the concept of person or the self, Parfit argues for a reductionist view. Most people hold that the self is some "deep further fact," such as a Cartesian ego, over and above the body, brain and a series of experiences. Parfit argues against such Cartesianism and contends that personal identity over time is no more than psychological connectedness or continuity. As he says, "ordinary survival is about as bad as being destroyed and having a Replica" (p. 280). Or, put another way, the identity of persons is reducible to something like that of nations. Such a view of persons will, if it does not lead to despair, at least make one less concerned about the self, and so more "impersonal" in one's view of things and one's moral beliefs and actions. Parfit argues against the Cartesian ego version of identity partly by denying that there is any evidence for such a thing, and partly by saying that if there were it would face problems of determination. Suppose scientists could replace my brain cells and experiences bit by bit with those of someone else, X, so that to begin with the resulting complex is a lot like me and at the end wholly X. Now if I am identical with a separately existing Cartesian ego, which is something over and above my brain cells and experiences, and if X is identical with another such ego, then there must be some time in the replacement when I am present while at the immediately succeeding time I am not but X is. But the change here will be so minimal as to be insignificant and moreover there are countless other minimal changes before and after it where no such change of egos is supposed to happen. This is not a plausible supposition, says Parfit, or if it is then the supposition of reductionism is more plausible. I am inclined to agree with Parfit here, but I am not persuaded overall because his argument relies on two beliefs I'm not inclined to accept and which Parfit has given me no reason to accept. These are that there is no alternative between Cartesian egos and reductionism, and that the replacement experiments he imagines are in principle, if not in practice, possible. I myself am inclined to believe that the Aristotelian soul is such an alternative, and that replacement experiments presuppose a false understanding of what it is to be a physical thing, whether human or otherwise. But despite these reservations the arguments remain powerful and stimulating. Parfit's book is certainly a very impressive one. It has the merit of possessing a clear overarching unity.

Additionally, it is clever, original, strikingly imaginative, and compellingly argued. Its conclusions may be disturbing, but there is no denying the power of their presentation.

I bought this book for my son. For a used book it was in very good condition and it arrived in a very short amount of time. I am very pleased.

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