

Nothing Matters in Survival

Stuart Rachels and Torin Alter

Abstract: Do I have a special reason to care about my future, as opposed to yours? We reject the common belief that I do. Putting our thesis paradoxically, we say that nothing matters in survival: nothing in our continued existence justifies any special self-concern. Such an “extreme” view is standardly tied to ideas about the metaphysics of persons, but not by us. After rejecting various arguments against our thesis, we conclude that simplicity decides in its favor.

Throughout the essay we honor Jim Rachels, whose final days exemplified his own unselfish morality as well as the “neutralist” ideal we espouse. As an appendix, we include the last original work to be published by James Rachels, in which he criticizes Sidgwick’s most famous defense of egoism.

1. The Basic Intuition

Call this *the basic intuition*: I have a special reason to care about my future, as opposed to anyone else’s. This reason is special because it is a reason for just me.

Consider pain. Pain is bad, and so I have a reason to care about your pain as well as mine. But on the basic intuition, I have a special reason to care about my future pain: a reason that is just mine and doesn’t correspond to any reason I have to care about yours.

Or consider death. Death is bad, and so I have reason to care about your death as well as mine. But on the basic intuition, I have a special reason to care about my death: a reason that is just mine and doesn’t correspond to any reason I have to care about yours.

Derek Parfit asks, “Why should we be specially concerned about our own future? What is it, in our survival, that gives us reason for such concern?”¹ We answer: nothing

¹ Derek Parfit, “Chapter 5, the Unimportance of Identity,” rough draft, received 7/04, p. 1. Compare Parfit, “The Unimportance of Identity,” in Henry Harris (ed.), *Identity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 13-45, especially p. 44, fn. 2. Also compare Peter Unger’s “prudential use” of “what matters in survival,” in *Identity, Consciousness and Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 94. Unger, like the contributors to this volume, was a dear friend of Jim Rachels.

does, because we have no such reason: nothing matters in survival.² Thus, we deny the basic intuition.

We do not deny that people have complex attitudes about their own futures—fears, dreads, and anxieties—that they typically do not have about others’ futures.³ Nor do we deny that people usually care more about themselves than about others. Also, we recognize that people often have derivative reasons to care more about their futures than the futures of others, because they can influence their own more. What we deny is that people have a nonderivative or intrinsic special reason to care about their own futures—a real reason, with normative force.

Consider a similar question: do I have a special reason to want my current pain to end? We again say no. Nothing matters in one’s current existence. I do have an intrinsic reason to end my pain: my pain would cease.⁴ But on our view, I have a similar reason to end your pain: your pain would cease.⁵

² Sometimes the phrase “what matters in survival” is not tied so closely to the idea of special self-concern. See Unger, *Identity, Consciousness and Value*, pp. 92-97.

³ Note, however, that I could have states with the phenomenology of these attitudes towards someone else’s future pain; I could have states that feel to me like fear, dread, anxiety, etc., even if these terms don’t strictly apply. And I need not make any cognitive errors. For example, I need not believe that the approaching pain will be mine in order to cringe at the thought of it.

⁴ Here we assume that the pain in question hurts. I might not have a reason to end the pain if it has been neutralized by analgesics and thus is not unpleasant.

⁵ Alter writes: my co-author thinks he’s given the best argument in the literature for your having a reason to end my pain. Please look at it, so he’ll stop griping to me about the fact that no one has ever read it. Stuart Rachels, “Nagelian Arguments against Egoism,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 80, no. 2 (2002), pp. 191-208, section IV.

We are defending a variant of what Parfit calls *the extreme claim*. To explain that claim, we must say something about reductionism about persons. Reductionists, Parfit writes, “believe that our continued existence over time just consists in certain other facts.”⁶ In *Reasons and Persons*, he assumes that these “other facts” are sub-personal facts about psychological and/or physical continuity.⁷ Non-reductionists, by contrast, believe that our continued existence consists in a “deep further fact,” such as the persistence of a non-physical Cartesian ego. Parfit initially defines the extreme claim as this conditional: “if the Reductionist View is true, we have no [special] reason to be concerned about our own futures.”⁸ But in other places he seems to include the reverse conditional in the definition. For example, he writes, “On [the extreme claim], only the deep further fact gives me a reason to be specially concerned about my future.”⁹ So, *the extreme claim* is that the basic intuition is false just in case reductionism is true.

By contrast, our thesis isn’t tied to any metaphysical theory about persons. We disagree with Geoffrey Madell, who writes, “It is obvious that I have every reason to be [specially] concerned if the person who will be in pain is me [in the non-reductionist sense]. . .”¹⁰ On our view, nothing matters in survival even on non-reductionism. Thus,

⁶ Parfit, “Chapter 5, the Unimportance of Identity,” p. 19. Compare his *Reasons and Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984; reprinted with corrections, 1986), p. 210 and “The Unimportance of Identity,” p. 16.

⁷ See Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, ch. 10.

⁸ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 307.

⁹ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 310.

¹⁰ Quoted in Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 307. We also disagree with Richard Swinburne, whom Parfit quotes on the same page.

our thesis is more extreme than the extreme claim.

2. James Rachels' End of Life

People scarcely know their own attitudes about pain and death until they have suffered and seen death approach. But we know what James Rachels' attitudes were. In July of 2003, he was diagnosed with metastatic bladder cancer. Eight weeks later, medical technicians harvested what little they could from his body, which had been ravaged by malignant growth. Before he died, he had plenty of time to reflect on everything he was about to lose. And he was never free from pain. But we know from our constant vigil at his bed that he didn't cry once. And we know that he never complained. In full possession of his faculties, and knowing death was upon him, he was sorry but not especially so. To us he seemed no more troubled about his hardships than he might have been about someone else's.

Although Jim would not approve of the comparison, the scene at his bedside was like Socrates before his death. The condemned man was calm and philosophical, while his loved ones were full of grief. Socrates said: "true philosophers make dying their profession, and . . . to them of all men death is least alarming. . . . So if you see anyone distressed at the prospect of dying, it will be proof enough that he is a lover not of wisdom but of the body."¹¹ Although Jim refutes Socrates' arguments about death, he

¹¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 67e-68c, Hugh Tredennick (trans.) in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds.), *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 50-51.

passed Socrates' test.¹²

Were Jim Rachels' attitudes rational? The answer may seem to depend on whether the basic intuition is true. Here is why. On the basic intuition, each of us has a special, intrinsic reason for self-concern. Nothing in Jim's attitudes evinced any such special self-concern. One might therefore infer that his attitudes were rational just in case the basic intuition is false. But this is too quick. One might accept the basic intuition and think that Jim's attitudes were rationally permissible, though not rationally required. In other words, one might find it rationally permissible for him to ignore his special reason for self-concern.

But could one accept the basic intuition and argue that Rachels' attitudes were *maximally* rational? Perhaps. Maximal rationality might require that one care about oneself and others not to specific degrees but only within certain ranges—ranges that overlap. In that case, if Jim's had a low degree of concern about his hardships and a high degree of concern about the hardships of others, and both degrees fell within the rationally required ranges, then his attitudes might have been maximally rational, even if he had a special intrinsic reason to care about his own hardships.

But all such arguments are beside the point, if we're right. On our view, no one has a special intrinsic reason for self-concern, and so attitudes that reflect no such concern require no such defense. Thus, we defend the maximal rationality of Jim Rachels' attitudes toward his pain and death, at the end of life.

¹² For Rachels' criticisms of Socrates' arguments, see his *Problems from Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), ch. 1.

3. Created from Selfish Animals

Evolution favors the selfish; animals that care more about themselves will, on average, reproduce more than animals that do not. In particular, evolution gives us a natural fear of our own death and pain but not of the death and pain of others (except, perhaps, of our close kin and those who benefit us). Death, after all, marks the end of our reproductive possibilities, while pain is associated with injury, which can diminish our reproductive success in various ways: by making us bleed to death, by making us defenseless against predators, by taking up resources, and so on. In short, evolution ensures that we care more about our own pain and death than that of others.

Because of this, we're encouraged to think we have a special reason to care about our own death and pain, in at least two ways.

1. Given our natural selfishness, it may seem intuitively obvious to us that a special reason exists.

Our point about evolution calls into question any such intuitive appeal, since the evolutionary process aims at fitness, not truth, wisdom, or rational attitudes.¹³ So, our opponents cannot assume that the basic intuition captures some philosophical insight. Nor can they assume that we care more about ourselves than others because we recognize that such concern is rationally permitted or required. Evolution and psychology can do all the explanatory work; no appeal to insight is needed.

¹³ Compare Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 308.

Note that we don't use evolution to show that the basic intuition is false. Rather, we use it against our opponents' intuitive argument.¹⁴ The evolutionary point is especially important because the literature on this topic is so intuition driven. Our opponents might not say that their belief in a special reason derives from intuition or unargued common sense, but it almost always does.

The belief that pain is intrinsically bad is also based on intuition. But it would be a mistake to try to explain this belief away in terms of its utility.¹⁵ Are we making a similar mistake? No. Here's the difference. One's experience of pain helps one understand its badness. So, when we're in pain and judge it to be bad, we're justified in our "intuitive" interpretation of the data. And we don't see how any evolutionary observations could be powerful enough to discredit it. By contrast, when we experience anticipatory anxiety, we go well beyond the perceptual data to say that the anxiety has some special warrant. On our view, "This pain I'm feeling is bad" is a (highly plausible) perceptual judgment, but "I have special reason to care" is not.¹⁶

¹⁴ For two weak intuitive arguments, see Mark Johnston, "Human Concerns without Superlative Selves," in Jonathan Dancy (ed.), *Reading Parfit* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 149-179, pp. 158-159 and David O. Brink, "Rational Egoism and the Separateness of Persons," also in *Reading Parfit*, pp. 96-134, p. 108.

¹⁵ Thomas Nagel describes this mistake as "insane" (*The View from Nowhere* (Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 157). Richard Kraut believes it. ("Desire and the Human Good," *Proceedings and Addresses of The American Philosophical Association*, 68, no. 2 (1994), pp. 39-54; see section VI, p. 46.)

¹⁶ See Stuart Rachels "A Defense of Two Optimistic Claims in Ethical Theory," *Philosophical Studies*, 112, no. 1 (2003), pp. 1-30; especially p. 19.

2. We might be misled by an illusory connection between reasons and motives.

‘Reason’ sometimes means ‘motive’, as in “Hitler’s reason for invading Russia was to give the German people more *Lebensraum* [living space].” This fact is unfortunate for work in this area.¹⁷ For if “special reason” means “distinctive motive,” then we obviously do have a special reason to fear our own future pain and death. Of course, philosophers don’t mean this when they say we have a special reason. But the fact that the basic intuition is obviously true on this natural interpretation gives it a plausible ring. And thus it may score intuitive points on the cheap.

Also, we shouldn’t assume that I have a special reason to dread dying just because I have a strong desire to avoid it. In general, a desire’s strength need not reflect its moral worth. Anyone who has read James Rachels’ dissertation will know Bishop Butler’s admonition not to confuse the power of a desire with its authority.¹⁸ Indeed, it’s an open question whether I have any reason to follow my desires, since they may have no authority whatsoever. The inference from “strong desire” to “special reason” is a *non sequitur* of numbing grossness.

One might hold that a person’s most fundamental, integrated and unshakable desires—including her self-regarding desires—are of special normative significance. On this view, such desires constitute one’s grain, like the grain of wood, and one has a

¹⁷ In other areas, too. Kantian ethicists sometimes move too easily from someone’s having a reason (= a motive) to someone’s having a reason (= a reason).

¹⁸ Almost no one has read James Rachels’ dissertation on Bishop Butler. We haven’t. Jim never wanted it published because he thought it was too imitative of his great mentor, W. D. Falk.

special reason not to go deeply and steadily against them.¹⁹ But this is implausible given that not all of us are good in our heart of hearts. People who are rotten to the core have no special reason, we think, to satisfy their deepest desires.

Perhaps some argument for the basic intuition that exploits a connection between desire and value might go through. But we doubt it. It's irrelevant if I can't help but care more about my own future; the point is to justify the extra concern, not to excuse it. And the theory that my life goes best if I satisfy my desires, or some subset of them, is irrelevant too. It implies nothing about whether I have a special, intrinsic reason to care about my future.

4. The Irrelevance of Tradition

According to a long tradition, it is rational or reasonable to promote one's self-interest as best one can on one's evidence. The word 'rational', Hare says, "is sometimes used more or less synonymously with 'prudent' . . ." ²⁰ Sidgwick cites over a dozen philosophers who, like him, sympathize with identifying rational and self-interested behavior.²¹ There is "preponderant assent," he says, to this view in "the common sense

¹⁹ Jonathan Bennett suggested this line of thought to Stuart Rachels.

²⁰ R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 190.

²¹ For a taste of Sidgwick's view, see Henry Sidgwick *The Methods of Ethics*, seventh edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1907; repr. 1981), p. 498. Sidgwick's list of philosophers who sympathize with identifying rational and self-interested action includes the ancients, Spinoza, Hobbes, Cumberland, Shaftesbury, Samuel Clark, Butler, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Paley, Stewart, Reid, Bentham, and Comte. Sidgwick on ancient Greece: *The Methods of Ethics*, pp. 91-92; on Spinoza: *The Methods of*

of mankind” and in “the history of ethical thought in England.”²² ‘Rational’ is closely associated with self-interest among economists and social theorists as well. According to Sen, “the self-interest interpretation of rationality . . . has been one of the central features of mainline economic theorizing for several centuries.”²³ And “[t]he concept of rationality familiar in social theory,” Gauthier says, “identifies rationality with the maximization of individual utility.”²⁴ Parfit makes the most sweeping statement of all: “It has been assumed, for more than two millennia, that it is irrational for anyone to do what he knows will be worse for himself.”²⁵

Ethics, p. 89; on Hobbes: *The Methods of Ethics*, pp. xix, 86, 89; on Cumberland: Sidgwick, “Hedonism and Ultimate Good,” *Mind*, Vol. 2, No. 5, 1877, pp. 27-38, p. 30; on Shaftesbury: Sidgwick, *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, fifth edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988, originally published by Macmillan and Company Ltd. in 1902), pp. 184-190; on Samuel Clark: *The Methods of Ethics*, pp. 119-120; on Butler: *The Methods of Ethics*, pp. 119-120 and pp. 205-206; on Berkeley: *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 120; Hume: *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, pp. 205-206, fn. 1; on Kant: *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, p. 276; on Paley: *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 121; on Stewart: *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, p. 232, fn. 1; on Reid: *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, p. 228; on Bentham: *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 119; and on Comte: *Outlines of the History of Ethics*, pp. 268-269. Robert Shaver disagrees with putting Butler, Hume, Kant and Bentham on this list but adds John Clark. (Shaver, *Rational Egoism* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).)

²² Henry Sidgwick, “Some Fundamental Ethical Controversies,” *Mind*, 14, no. 56 (1889), pp. 473-487, p. 483.

²³ Amartya Sen, *Ethics & Economics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 15.

²⁴ David Gauthier, *Moral Dealing: Contract, Ethics and Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 152.

²⁵ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 130.

According to another tradition, it is rational to promote one's goals as best one can on one's evidence. This is instrumentalism. It differs from the self-interest theory because one's goals may not coincide with one's interests. Hume, Ramsey, Russell, Savage, Hempel, Foot, Williams, Harsanyi, Simon, Harman, and Fumerton, for example, have used 'rational' or 'reasonable' instrumentally.²⁶ Today Bayesian instrumentalism is the dominant approach to rationality.²⁷

²⁶ See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), bk. 2, part 3, section 3; Frank Ramsey, "Truth and Probability," in his *The Foundations of Mathematics and Others Essays* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1931), pp. 156-198; Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1954), p. viii; Leonard J. Savage, *The Foundations of Statistics* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1954) and *The Foundations of Statistics*, second edition (New York: Dover, 1972); Carl G. Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 463; Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," in her *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 157-173 (originally in *The Philosophical Review*, 81, no. 3 (1972), pp. 305-316), p. 162 (but she has changed her view; see her *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press, 2001)); Bernard Williams: "Internal and External Reasons," in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101-113; John C. Harsanyi, "Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior," in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, (eds.), *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 39-62 (originally in *Social Research*, 44 (1977), pp. 623-656), p. 42; Herbert Simon, *Reason in Human Affairs* (Stanford University Press, 1983), pp. 7-8; Gilbert Harman, "Human Flourishing, Ethics, and Liberty," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 12 (1983), pp. 307-322 (revised in his *Explaining Value and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 151-164), p. 320); Richard A. Fumerton, *Reason and Morality: A Defense of the Egocentric Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 155.

²⁷ For more on both traditions, and on a third "ethical" tradition, see Stuart Rachels, "On Three Alleged Theories of Rational Behavior" (unpublished).

Philosophers in either tradition might affirm something like the basic intuition. Consider the self-interested use of 'rational'. On this tradition, it is rational for me to promote my interests over the interests of others. If so, I have a special reason to promote my future interests. And so, I may have a special reason to care about them—this is the basic intuition. On instrumentalism, I have a special reason to promote my own goals. For most of us, avoiding our own pain and death is a much stronger goal than helping others avoid theirs. So, on instrumentalism, most of us have an extra reason to avoid our own pain and death—and thus to care about them. This is not the basic intuition, since the extra reason is not intrinsic but derived from my goals. It is, however, a variant of the basic intuition.

It may now seem as though two time-honored traditions entail the basic intuition or something like it. But this is not clear. These traditions emphasize the rationality of intelligently pursuing one's interests or goals. However, it is usually left open whether there can be just as much rationality in intelligently pursuing different goals or the interests of others. Insofar as this issue is left open, there is no commitment to the existence of a special reason to pursue or care about one's own interests or goals. The literature on rationality is so vast and varied that some of it probably does presuppose the basic intuition. But no matter. Even if these traditions assume the basic intuition or something like it, why should we defer to them? We needn't be swayed by unargued presuppositions.

5. A Challenge from Ethics

According to James Rachels, to live ethically is to live by reasons—by every consideration that bears on action. “Morality is, at the very least, the effort to guide one’s conduct by reason—that is, to do what there are the best reasons for doing . . .”²⁸ Do I have a special reason to dread and avoid my own future pain? If the special reason is a real reason, with normative force—if it reflects real value and bears on conduct, where it can—then this is an ethical question.

A longstanding ethical debate is over whether I am justified in giving my own interests special weight when I act, just because they’re mine. This is not our issue. We’re concerned with preferential caring, not preferential action; not, “should I keep the analgesic for myself?” but “should I care more about my own future pain?”²⁹ Indirectly, however, the issue is relevant. For if I have a special reason to prevent my own future pain and death, caring more about those interests might make sense (either intrinsically, or as a means to advancing them). If so, this would be due to a special reason. Thus the issue about action bears on our thesis.

Should my interests get extra weight in my moral deliberations? We don’t think so; we follow James Rachels in taking a “neutralist” view. We believe that everyone matters equally, from all points of view. The literature on this topic mirrors the literature

²⁸ James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, fourth edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), p.

14.

²⁹ Dan Moller emphasizes this distinction in discussing our attitudes towards future and past pains. (“Parfit on Pains, Pleasures and the Time of their Occurrence,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 32 (2002), pp. 67-82.)

on the rationality of special concern. Intuitively, people think they should matter more to themselves, but they can't really say why. Philosophers have offered few arguments for why one is intrinsically entitled to give one's own interests special weight. Of course, one might give those interests special weight as a means to greater utility, but this is irrelevant. And if one cannot help but be selfish, that's irrelevant too.

We'll try to bolster ethical neutralism in two ways.

First, we refer readers to our appendix, in which James Rachels effectively criticizes Sidgwick's most famous defense of egoism. By criticizing this argument, Rachels criticizes the first step of an argument for the basic intuition.

Second, we have something to say about a familiar objection to neutralism. Many philosophers worry that unless each of us has special reason for self-concern, morality will be too demanding. But is that true? A savvy moralist wouldn't demand that people act like saints, for such demands are usually counterproductive. The following *is* true: if I have no moral reason to favor myself over others, then I would need to make vast sacrifices to become the best person I could be (assuming that I could make vast sacrifices). But why should *that* implication count against ethical neutralism? Becoming the best basketball player one could be would require a highly demanding schedule of training. Why should it be easier to become the best *person* one could be? Down in Alabama we have a saying: "Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die." Similarly, we say, "Everyone wants to be a saint, but no one wants to give all their time and money to the starving." Fulfilling one's moral potential should be hard, since—to

quote Jim's favorite poem—"the world's more full of weeping than you can understand."³⁰

6. A Challenge from Rationality

In the philosophical literature on special concern, ethical issues are usually not discussed as such. The basic intuition is thought to be about rationality, not ethics.

Although ethics and rationality are closely related, it's possible for something to lack normative force yet be reasonable. For example, someone might think: "If P entails Q, and you believe P, then you have a reason to believe Q. If instead you believe not-Q, that would be *prima facie* unreasonable. However, the world need not be a worse place, in any way and to any degree, because you have inconsistent beliefs. And nothing of value should ever be sacrificed merely to make your beliefs consistent." Thus, there might be truths about rationality that are not ethical truths. Having one's beliefs track logical truths may be reasonable, even if such adherence doesn't really matter.

Is the rationality of special concern like the rationality of consistent beliefs? Consider the affective nature of special concern. How can fear or dread be logically related to something else? Emotions are complex wholes, partly cognitive and partly phenomenological. Cognitive content can certainly have logical relations to other things; for example, one's fear might (or perhaps must) include a belief with propositional entailments. Philosophers have argued that even phenomenology might have logical

³⁰ This is from the refrain of W. B. Yeats' "The Stolen Child," in Richard J. Finneran (ed.), *The Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 18-19.

relations to other things,³¹ but the cognitive content of emotions seems more promising to pursue. The propositional content of dread is something like, “I am going to be in pain; it is going to hurt; I don’t want it to happen.” Is there anything about that which would justify special concern? The challenge is to justify concern that can’t be justified by the thought, “That other person is going to be in pain; it is going to hurt him; he doesn’t want it to happen.”

There is no entailment here. Is there some weaker relation of support? Many philosophers think so. They think: it’s *my* pain, and since it’ll be bad *for me*, I have a special reason to fear it. This sounds good, but it’s not going to be true just because it contains multiple indexicals referring to the same person. We get the intuition, but we feel it dissolve once we reflect on its sources.

Consider what Harold Langsam thinks is the worst-case metaphysical scenario for our view: endurance non-reductionism. On his view, “the special concern we each have for our own future pains can be justified if and only if endurance Non-Reductionism is

³¹ For example, on analytic functionalism phenomenal concepts are analytically tied to certain causal concepts. See David Armstrong, *A Materialist Theory of Mind* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968) and David Lewis, “Psychophysical and Theoretical Identifications,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 50 (1972), pp. 249–58. Another example: on certain representationalist views, there are logical relations between phenomenal and representational properties. See David Chalmers, “The Representational Character of Experience,” in Brian Leiter (ed.), *The Future for Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 153-181.

true.”³² This may seem true because, on endurance non-reductionism, both the nature of persons and the nature of persistence seem especially robust.

Objects *endure* on a three-dimensionalist account. On such an account, subjects endure; the subject that feels pain at a given moment persists over time. And so the present subject is identical to the future self. By contrast, on a four-dimensionalist account, objects merely *perdure*, and so a subject is just a slice (a temporal stage) of the self and is not identical to it.³³ On this account, the connection between the present subject and the future self seems less robust, somehow. The existence of special concern for one’s future may thus seem more plausible if one endures rather than perdures—especially if one’s continued existence does not consist in psychological or physical continuity.

But beyond this vague observation, how does endurance non-reductionism support the basic intuition? Langsam writes,

In sum, my endurance Non-Reductionist account has shown that my future pains are bad for me in a way in which other people’s future pains are not bad for me; since I have an agent-relative reason to avoid what is bad for me, I have a reason to avoid my future pains that is not also a reason to help others avoid their future pains.³⁴

³² Harold Langsam, “Pain, Personal Identity, and the Deep Further Fact,” *Erkenntnis*, 54 (2001), pp. 247-271, p. 267.

³³ Langsam, “Pain, Personal Identity, and the Deep Further Fact,” p. 263.

³⁴ Langsam, “Pain, Personal Identity, and the Deep Further Fact,” p. 266. Agent-relative reasons are reasons only for the agent.

Interpreted one way, Langsam's conclusion is consistent with our view: for even if I have a reason to avoid my pain which is not a reason to help others avoid theirs—namely, that the pain is mine—I may have a reason to help others avoid their pain which is not a reason to avoid mine—namely, that the pain is theirs. But Langsam means something stronger: that I have a reason to avoid my pain but no corresponding reason to help others avoid theirs. However, now his summary contains an unwarranted leap from “my pains are bad for me in a way in which other people's are not” to “I have a reason to avoid my pains but no corresponding reason to help others avoid theirs.” The inference is unwarranted because if there is some way W1 in which my pains are uniquely bad for me, then there is some way W2 in which other people's pains are uniquely bad for them; and W2 as well as W1 may be a reason that applies to me. We can't find an argument in Langsam's essay that gets around this response.

7. A Challenge from Ethics or Rationality

We'll now consider an argument by Jennifer Whiting that could be used against our view.³⁵ It might be considered part of the ethics literature or the rationality literature. It's all about reasons. Whiting writes,

If we believe that at least part of what justifies concern for our friends is the fact that we and they have common experiences, shared desires, interests and values, then it is

³⁵ Jennifer Whiting, “Friends and Future Selves,” *The Philosophical Review*, 95, no. 4 (1986), pp. 547-580.

plausible to claim that psychological continuity is analogous to friendship in those respects in which friendship justifies concern.³⁶

Whiting seeks to justify, not the basic intuition, but a variant of it. Instead of arguing that I have a special reason to care about my pain, she argues that I have a reason that others share *just in case they have my interests and values (etc.)*. The reason is special in that it applies to a limited class of agents. But on her view, the class includes both me and those who have my interests and values.

Of course it's good for me to care about my friends. And it may be good for me to care more about friends than strangers, for the extrinsic reason that I can usually benefit my friends more. But do I have a special *intrinsic* reason to care about my friends? Should they matter more to me than strangers, at the ground floor? We think not. We think that trying to justify special concern about one's future by appealing to special concern for one's friends is trying to use one prejudice to justify another. It's like saying, "since I have reason to be specially concerned about white people (since they're white), I have reason to be specially concerned about my future self, since he will be white." To defend the idea that friends should not get special consideration, we refer readers to James Rachels' "Morality, Parents and Children."³⁷ He persuasively argues that parents do not have special obligations to their children. And, as he says, "the deeper issue has to do with personal relationships in general."³⁸

³⁶ Whiting, "Friends and Future Selves," p. 558.

³⁷ James Rachels, *Can Ethics Provide Answers? And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), pp. 213-233.

³⁸ Rachels, *Can Ethics Provide Answers?*, p. 214.

8. The Basic Intuition and My Division

On the basic intuition, personal identity matters in survival: a future person's being me gives me a special reason for concern. In arguing that personal identity doesn't matter, Parfit thus denies the basic intuition. Let's examine his main argument.

Parfit considers two possible operations:

The Single Case: After half my brain is destroyed, the other half is successfully transplanted into the empty skull of a body that is just like mine.

The Double Case (or My Division): Both halves of my brain are successfully transplanted into different bodies that are just like mine. Two people wake up, each of whom has half my brain and is, both physically and psychologically, just like me.³⁹

Call the person who emerges from the operation in the Single Case *Halfy*, and call the people who emerge from the operations in the Double Case *Lefty* and *Righty*. I am identical to Halfy, given the reasonable assumption that, "if there will be one future person who will have enough of my brain to be psychologically continuous with me, that person would be me."⁴⁰ But, Parfit argues, I am not identical to either Lefty or Righty.

³⁹ Parfit, "The Unimportance of Identity," p. 42.

⁴⁰ Parfit, "The Unimportance of Identity," p. 41.

They cannot both be me, he says, because they are different people and identity is transitive. And “since I have the same relation to each of these people, there is nothing that could make me one of them rather than the other.”⁴¹

Parfit then reasons as follows. The relation between me and Halfy contains what matters, if anything does. Is the same true of my relation to Lefty? There is one difference: I am identical to Halfy but not Lefty. But this is only because, in the Double Case, Righty exists. This difference is not an intrinsic difference, “not a difference in the nature or content of the relation.”⁴² In all intrinsic respects, my relation to Lefty is the same as my relation to Halfy. And what matters depends only on intrinsic features of my relations to future persons. So, my relation to Lefty must also contain what matters, if anything does. Thus, personal identity *per se* doesn’t matter and the basic intuition is false.⁴³

One might reply by retreating to what Parfit calls *the moderate claim*. To explain this claim, we should explain some terminology. Consider the memory of hearing Jim Rachels talk about his favorite movie, *The General*. Or consider intending to see the movie and then carrying out that intention. In both cases, there is what Parfit calls a

⁴¹ Parfit, “The Unimportance of Identity,” p. 42.

⁴² Parfit, “The Unimportance of Identity,” p. 44.

⁴³ We have simplified Parfit’s argument. He writes that “what matters *most* must be the intrinsic nature of this relation [*viz.*, my relation to future persons]” (*Reasons and Persons*, p. 263, emphasis added). We have omitted ‘most’. On his view, personal identity might matter slightly. (*Reasons and Persons*, p. 263.) But he goes on to say that personal identity can make only a trivial difference: “as trivial as the fact that, if I had two identical siblings, they could not be called my twins” (“The Unimportance of Identity,” p. 44). Such a trivial fact couldn’t justify the basic intuition.

direct psychological connection between persons at two different times—for example, between me yesterday and me today.⁴⁴ He uses this concept to define two relations. *Psychological continuity* is “the holding of particular direct psychological connections.”⁴⁵ And *psychological connectedness* is “the holding of overlapping chains of *strong* connectedness.”⁴⁶ Parfit then defines *R* as “psychological connectedness and/or continuity, with the right kind of cause.”⁴⁷ And he defines the moderate claim as, “Relation *R* gives us a reason for special concern.”⁴⁸

The moderate claim is untouched by Parfit’s argument. Moderates think I have a special reason to care about my future self because he and I are *R*-related, not because we are identical. I am *R*-related to both Righty and Lefty. Thus, on the moderate claim, I have a special reason to care about what will happen to each of them, even though neither is me.

⁴⁴ Parfit writes, “Other such direct connections are those which hold when a belief, or a desire, or any other psychological feature, continues to be had” (*Reasons and Persons*, p. 205).

⁴⁵ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 206.

⁴⁶ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 206. He writes that *strong* connectedness obtains when “the number of direct connections, over any day, is *at least half* the number that hold, over every day, in the lives of nearly every actual person” (*Reasons and Persons*, p. 206). He adds, “This suggestion would need expanding, since there are many ways to count the number of direct connections. And some kinds of connection should be given more importance than others. . . . more weight should be given to those connections which are distinctive, or different in different people” (*Reasons and Persons*, p. 515, fn. 6).

⁴⁷ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 215.

⁴⁸ Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 311. Note that Parfit’s definition of the moderate claim doesn’t mention reductionism, unlike his definition of the extreme claim.

But once the scope of the alleged special reason extends to persons other than me, the idea that I have such a reason loses some of its intuitive allure. And there is no clear reason to accept this idea, beyond a dubious appeal to intuition. Moreover, simplicity counts against it.⁴⁹

9. Simplicity Wins

Here is the basic intuition along with the variants we have discussed:

- The basic intuition: I have a special, intrinsic reason to care about my future.
- The instrumentalist variant: I have a special reason to care about my future, when such a reason can be derived from my goals.
- Whiting's variant: I have a special, intrinsic reason to care about my future and the futures of those who share my interests and values.
- The moderate variant: I have a special, intrinsic reason to care about persons to whom I am R-related.

The basic intuition and its variants each claim that a certain kind of reason exists. Thus, in denying these views we have parsimony on our side.

The parsimony principle—Occam's Razor—says that if theory T1 postulates fewer entities than theory T2, then T1 is more likely to be true, other things being equal.

⁴⁹ Parfit regards the moderate claim (and the extreme claim) as defensible. (*Reasons and Persons*, pp. 307-312.)

Occam's Razor is usually understood qualitatively, as concerning kinds of entities. This contrasts with a quantitative version, which concerns individual entities. What kinds of entities do we deny exist?

Defenders of the basic intuition posit special intrinsic reasons to care about one's own future. Instrumentalists posit special reasons to care about one's future, when such a reason can be derived from one's goals. Whiting's defenders posit special intrinsic reasons to care about one's future and the futures of those who share one's values and interests. Moderates posit special intrinsic reasons to care about persons to whom one is R-related. We reject all such reasons.

Parsimony alone may count for little. But here it wins, since there's no countervailing evidence.

10. Conclusion

We have defended the idea that nothing matters in survival. On our view, I have no special, intrinsic reason to care about my future. I have reason for self-concern, and such concern is rational, but so is concern for others. The courage James Rachels displayed at the end of his life was not only good for himself and for those around him, it was fully rational.

Appendix: Egoism, by James Rachels

James Rachels shared this essay with Stuart Rachels several years before he died. We don't know whether he wanted it published, but we think it is a beautiful piece.

The Principle of Equality¹ rules out of court any doctrine that places any group outside the bounds of moral concern or that gives their interests less than full consideration. Racism and sexism are the most obvious doctrines that do this. Egoism is another. Egoism is the idea that it is permissible for each person to pursue his or her own interests exclusively—thus, there is no moral requirement that we take anyone *else's* interests into account when we are deciding what to do.

Although Henry Sidgwick was no egoist, he believed that Egoism is, strictly speaking, irrefutable. He wrote that

It would be contrary to Common Sense to deny that the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental, and that consequently “I” am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals: and this being so, I do not see how it can be

¹ The Principle of Equality is, “We can justify treating people differently only if we can show that there is some factual difference between them that is relevant to justifying the difference in treatment” (James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, fourth edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), p. 89).

[Footnote added by Stuart Rachels.]

proved that this distinction is not to be taken as fundamental in determining the ultimate end of rational action for an individual.²

Many philosophers have agreed with this, but it is nevertheless puzzling. Why is the distinction between self and others any more “real and fundamental” than, say, the difference between men and women, or the difference between humans and rabbits? Each of these differences is real. To say that one is more “fundamental” than the others is merely puzzling. Fundamental in what respect? If the point is supposed to be that the distinction between self and others is more fundamental *for ethics*, that just begs the question.

Moreover, is it really true that “I am concerned with the quality of my existence as an individual in a sense, fundamentally important, in which I am not concerned with the quality of the existence of other individuals?” If this were true, it would be a surprising psychological fact about us; but rather than being a suitable basis for ethics, from an ethical point of view this might be quite regrettable. On reflection, however, what Sidgwick says does not appear to be true, or at least it is not true of everyone. Many parents are just as concerned with the “quality of the existence” of their children as they are with the quality of their own existences—indeed, many would willingly die for their children if it were required of them.

Egoism seems no different than racism, sexism, or speciesism. Could not the “irrefutability” of racism, for example, be asserted in the same way?

² Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, seventh edition (London: Macmillan, 1962; but originally published in 1907), p. 498.

It would be contrary to Common Sense to deny that the distinction between the races is real and fundamental, and that consequently Caucasians are concerned with the quality of the existence of Caucasians in a sense, fundamentally important, in which they are not concerned with the quality of the existence of other races: and this being so, I do not see how it can be proved that this distinction is not to be taken as fundamental in determining the ultimate end of rational action for Caucasians.

Of course the specific claims made here are false; but the comparable claims in the original quotation also seem false, and for similar reasons.

Egoism is not irrefutable. It is vulnerable to the same objections as racism and the other discriminatory doctrines. Each of these doctrines draws a circle around some group and says that the interests of those within the circle count for more. Egoism is a view of the same kind. It draws the circle of concern in the narrowest possible way. For each of us, there is only one individual inside it.

To expose what is wrong with racism, we ask: what is the difference between the races that makes the interests of the members of one race less important than the interests of others? As we have seen, answering this question is a complicated matter, but in the end the only general answer must be that there are no such differences. Similarly, to expose what is wrong with Egoism, each of us may ask: what is the difference between myself and others that justifies regarding my interests as more important than everyone else's? *What is it that makes me so special?* Am I more capable than others of enjoying

life? Do I care more about my life? Am I more sensitive to suffering? Am I somehow more deserving? To all these questions the answer is plainly no.

But perhaps someone will think he is special in some more particular way—perhaps he will think he is smarter or more talented than other people. This, if true, might justify special treatment in special sorts of cases. If I am more musically talented than others, I should be given preference in musical training because I will benefit more from it. But as we have seen, the relevance of such particular characteristics depends entirely on the type of treatment in question—musical talent will *not* be relevant to other sorts of treatment. Similarly, just as in a particular case I may benefit more from a kind of treatment, or deserve it more, in a particular case I may have special treatment coming to me as compensation. But as before, this principle applies to me on the same basis as it applies to everyone else.

Failing to find any other general justification for regarding my own interests as special, I might fall back on the fact that *I am I*. After all, as Sidgwick put it, “the distinction between any one individual and any other is real and fundamental.” But how can anything of moral importance follow from the trivial truth that I am the person that I am, unless this is combined with the further nontrivial thought that somehow I am different from others?

Moreover, in addition to the general question, we may ask a host of specific questions about specific cases. Suppose I face a choice between spending money on myself—say, buying myself a new shirt—and giving that money to charity, to feed the hungry. Egoism says that I may be concerned only with myself, so I may buy the shirt. But what is it about me that makes it more important for me to have a new shirt than for

those other people to eat? Failing an answer, it turns out that Egoism is an arbitrary doctrine in the same sense that racism is arbitrary. They violate the Principle of Equality in the same way.