

*Do Lefty and Righty Matter More Than Lefty Alone?**

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ABSTRACT. Derek Parfit argues that fission is better for you than ordinary death. But is having more fission products with good lives better for you than just one? In this paper, we argue that it is. We argue that, if your brain is split and the halves are transplanted into two recipients (who both have good lives), then it is better for you if both transplants succeed than if only one of them does (other things being equal). This upshot rules out, among other things, that your personal value of standing in the relation that matters in survival to multiple people is equal to the average well-being of their lives.

Your brain is divided, and each half is transplanted into the body of one of two people whose brains have been fatally injured. Each of the resulting people would, if the transplant succeeds, be psychologically (and phenomenally) continuous with you as you are now.¹ Call the person that would have the left half of your brain ‘Lefty’ and the person that would have the right half of your brain ‘Righty.’² Let us assume that each year in Lefty’s and Righty’s lives are of equal positive well-being. And consider an outcome where both transplants succeed:

Double Success Lefty lives for 40 years, and Righty lives for 40 years.

Given the transitivity of identity, you cannot be identical both with Lefty and with Righty, who (plausibly) are distinct people.³ And, since your relation to Lefty is much the same as your relation to Righty, you cannot plausibly be identical with one of them but not the other. So you are identical with neither Lefty nor Righty. But, even so, Derek Parfit argues that

* Forthcoming in *Erkenntnis*.

¹ Wiggins 1967, p. 53 and Parfit 1984, pp. 254–255.

² Following Strawson 1970, p. 186.

³ The transitivity of identity is the principle that, if $X = Y$ and $Y = Z$, then $X = Z$.

this outcome is better for you than an outcome where both transplants fail:

Double Failure Neither transplant succeeds.

Parfit's argument is that Double Failure is worse for you than an outcome where one transplant succeeds:

Single Success Lefty lives for 40 years, and the transplant to Righty does not succeed.

In this outcome, there is only one survivor. It seems that you could, in principle, survive a brain transplant and that you could survive with just half of your brain. Hence it is plausible that you survive in Single Success and that this is better for you than dying in Double Failure.⁴ But, if Single Success is better for you than Double Failure, then your relation to Lefty must contain what matters in survival.

Next, note that your relation to Lefty is the same in Double Success as in Single Success—the only difference is the lack of uniqueness. Since the relation that matters is plausibly intrinsic, it should not depend on uniqueness. The addition of Righty should not make it the case that your relation to Lefty no longer contains what matters in survival. And, as we argued earlier, your relation to Lefty in Single Success contains what matters in survival. So your relation to Lefty in Double Success must also contain what matters in survival. And, by symmetrical reasoning, your relation to Righty in Double Success must contain what matters in survival. Accordingly, Parfit concludes, Double Success should be better for you than Double Failure.⁵

But how does Double Success compare to Single Success? We have already seen that your relation to Lefty in Double Success contains what matters in survival, and your equivalent relation to Righty in that outcome should also contain what matters.⁶ Nevertheless, even though both your relation to Lefty and your relation to Righty contain what matters, we may still doubt that Double Success is better for you than Single Success. For example, consider the following (at first glance) compelling view:

⁴ Parfit 1984, p. 254; 1995, p. 42.

⁵ Parfit 1971, p. 5; 1984, pp. 261–262; 1993, pp. 24–25; 1995, pp. 42–43.

⁶ Parfit 1971, p. 10; 1984, p. 262; 1993, p. 25.

The Average View The personal value of standing in the relation that matters in survival to multiple people is equal to the average well-being of their lives.⁷

Given the Average View, Double Success is equally as good for you as Single Success, since Lefty and Righty have equally good lives. We will argue, however, that Double Success is better for you than Single Success. Thereby, we show that the Average View is false.

Consider first a case where only the transplant to Righty succeeds but there is a slight mishap in this transplant so that Righty only lives on for 20 years:

Half Success Righty lives for 20 years, and the transplant to Lefty does not succeed.

The previous argument that Single Success is better for you than Double Failure also shows, changing what needs to be changed, that Half Success is better for you than Double Failure.

Now, consider the following variation, where both transplants succeed overall but there is (as in Half Success) a slight mishap in the transplant to Righty so that Righty only lives on for 20 years:

One-and-a-Half Success Lefty lives for 40 years, and Righty lives for 20 years.

Your relation to Lefty is the same in Single Success as in One-and-a-Half Success. And it must be good for you to stand in that relation to Lefty, since Single Success is better for you than Double Failure. Likewise, your relation to Righty is the same in Half Success as in One-and-a-Half Success. And it must be good for you to stand in this relation to Righty, since Half Success is better for you than Double Failure. So, from a prudential perspective, One-and-a-Half Success differs from Single Success only in that you also stand in the relation that matters to Righty—which, as we have seen, is good for you. Since the relation that matters in survival is plausibly intrinsic, the value of standing in that relation to a future person should not be diminished by your standing in the relation that matters

⁷ Since the relation that matters in survival plausibly comes in degrees, one might prefer a weighted average. But this complication does not matter for our argument.

to some other person.⁸ Accordingly, One-and-a-Half Success has everything that is good for you in Single Success and, in addition, you stand in a relation to Righty that is good for you. Therefore, One-and-a-Half Success should be at least as good for you as Single Success.

(Note that this claim by itself rules out the Average View. So, in order to not assume the point at issue against that view, we did not merely assume this claim, we argued for it.⁹)

Next, compare One-and-a-Half Success to Double Success. From a prudential perspective, the only difference between these outcomes is that one of the people to which you stand in the relation that matters, Righty, has a better life in Double Success than in One-and-a-Half Success. Since the relation that matters in survival is intrinsic, the value for you of standing in the relation that matters to Lefty should not be affected

⁸ More generally, we are committed to the claim that the value of standing in the relation that matters in survival to a future person depends only on the intrinsic features of that person's future life, and not on what other future persons you stand in that relation to. This invariance claim might seem to commit us to a prudential analogue of the Repugnant Conclusion. Note, however, that the invariance claim does not commit us to the additivity of prudential value—the idea that the prudential value of standing in the relation that matters to multiple persons is the sum of their well-being levels. Similarly, just because *A* and *B* both have intrinsic value does not mean that the intrinsic value of the combination of *A* and *B* is the sum of their intrinsic values. (See Moore 1903, p. 28.) Hence, given that we are not committed to the additivity of prudential value, we are not committed to a prudential version of the Repugnant Conclusion (see Parfit 1984, p. 388). Consider, for instance, a kind of perfectionist who thinks that some very good lives are lexically better than any number of mediocre lives (compare Parfit 1986, pp. 161–164). Even if such views are combined with the invariance claim, they can still escape the Repugnant Conclusion. Those views can consistently agree that the prudential value of each person is invariant but reject that the prudential values for all persons should be added up to get the prudential value of the whole. Moreover, even if we were to get a prudential version of the Repugnant Conclusion (given some further assumptions), this need not be a problem. Even though the Repugnant Conclusion is counter-intuitive, it may still be true. See Zuber et al. 2021.

⁹ The argument can be generalized to support the following principle:

The Prudential Mere-Addition Principle If you stand in the relation that matters to the same people (and only them) in outcomes *X* and *X*⁺ and each of these people have at least as good lives in *X*⁺ as in *X* except that, in *X*⁺, you also stand in the relation that matters in survival to an additional person who has a good life, then *X*⁺ is at least as good for you as *X*.

Basically, this principle states that the mere addition of an extra person to which you stand in the relation that matters in survival should be at least as good for you as the non-addition of that person. Ross (2014, p. 257) proposes an analogous, weaker principle for the addition of bad lives.

by the change in Righty's life. And it is better for you to stand in the relation that matters to Righty in Double Success than in One-and-a-Half Success, because Double Success is better for Righty than One-and-a-Half Success. Hence Double Success should be better for you than One-and-a-Half Success.¹⁰

Now, as One-and-a-Half Success is at least as good for you as Single Success, and Double Success is better for you than One-and-a-Half Success, it follows by the transitivity of *at least as good as* that Double Success is better for you than Single Success.^{11,12}

Among other things, this result rules out the Average View. The argument shows that, other things being equal, having more fission products with good lives is good for you—even if the additional fission products are worse off than the others. Given that each person involved has a good life, fission is not only better for you than death, it is (other things being equal) better for you than survival without fission.

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¹⁰ This argument can be generalized to support the following principle:

The Strong Prudential Pareto Principle If (i) you stand in the relation that matters to the same people (and only them) in outcomes *X* and *Y*, (ii) *X* is at least as good as *Y* for all of them, and (iii) *X* is better than *Y* for at least one of them, then *X* is better for you than *Y*.

¹¹ The transitivity of *at least as good as* is the principle that, if *X* is at least as good as *Y* and *Y* is at least as good as *Z*, then *X* is at least as good as *Z*.

¹² This argument can be thought of as a combination of Parfit's arguments against identity being what matters in survival (described in the introduction) and his (1984, pp. 419–430) Mere Addition Paradox in population ethics.

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