

## Parfit's Provocation

Es gibt keine common-sense-Antwort auf ein philosophisches Problem. Man kann den common-sense gegen die Angriffe von Philosophen nur verteidigen, indem man ihre Probleme löst, d. h., indem man sie von der Versuchung heilt, den common-sense anzugreifen, und nicht, indem man die common-sense-Ansichten wiederholt.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

After analysing the most important philosophical answers to the question of the conditions of unity and sketching our own position in the previous four chapters, it's time now to tackle the third basic issue. The discussion of a prominent argument by Parfit will thereby serve as a transition. He argued that personal identity is not what matters as far as continued existence is concerned. His catchphrase formulation of this theory reads: »Identity is not what matters in survival«.

The more precise definition of the meaning of this slogan and the analysis of Parfit's argument allows us to mark the connections between the second and third basic issues. With this we will be able to continue a thread of our course of argumentation again that we dropped in the second chapter: the question of the link between the first and third basic issues. The discussion of Parfit's thesis will be made to measure for the course of our argumentation. In the following, many aspects of Parfit's deliberations and many objections brought by other authors against Parfit will for this reason either play no role at all, or else only insofar as they are relevant for the argumentation and targets of proof of our study.<sup>81</sup>

As will be shown in the course of this chapter, the philosophical yield of Parfit's provocation lies above all in revealing the activist and evaluative dimension of personhood. Over and above this, we will need the concept of individual personality to explicate his argument and we'll see that a satisfactory answer to the questions posed by Parfit is only possible if we agree on the structure of personality as our *lebensform* and enquire about the conditions of identity for personality. Thus, Parfit's provocation not only facilitates our transition to the third basic issue, but also predefines the list of questions we will have to deal with in the remainder of this book in order to be able to evolve the blueprint of a comprehensive conception of all aspects of the ›identity‹ of human persons

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<sup>81</sup> The discussion contributions on Parfit's proposal are barely manageable; cp. the contributions on his whole theory in Darcy (1997) and in particular to the question of personal unity in Herrmann (1995) and Teichert (2000: Chapter IV).

The argumentational transition to our third basic issue will follow in four steps. After a short presentation of the provocation that Parfit expressed in the formula »identity is not what matters in survival«, I will undertake some clarifications so as to be able to define the exact content of Parfit's thesis. After that, the most important arguments made against Parfit will be presented before, in conclusion, the philosophical yield of this discussion is summed up. Since this perspective on Parfit's deliberations is not only of interest under the assumption of our specific answer to the question of personal unity (cp. Chapter 6), but also generally profitable for clarifying the relation between the second and third basic issues, in this chapter I'll again be speaking about personal unity and using the concept of persistence only where we mean the biological approach we proposed.

### 7.1 Parfit's Provocation: »Identity is not what matters!«

One of Parfit's central theses serves him as the title of an article published in the year 1995: »The Unimportance of Identity«. In his magnum opus *Reasons and Persons*, published in 1984, the Parfitian provocation also appears as the title of the twelfth chapter, which is entitled »Why our identity is not what matters« (Parfit 1989: 245). In the article published as early as 1971 and related to our group of themes, the assertion that in his theory »the question of identity is no longer important« has already turned up as the central thesis (in the German translation as Parfit 1979: 72). Parfit's assertion is that his answer to the unity of persons gives rise to a central consequence: »The main conclusion to be drawn is that *personal identity is not what matters*« (Parfit 2003: 130). Expressed in another way, his at first glance seemingly paradoxical assertion states that it isn't or shouldn't be identity that matters for survival.

This formulation already indicates that the significance of Parfit's thesis, like that of many other famous philosophical theses that have provoked big debates, is not clear. So, we must immediately ask in what sense »identity« is being used and brought into opposition with »survival«. The expression »what matters« also proves on closer inspection to be in need of explication. This already becomes apparent from the fact that Parfit submits his thesis once in the form of a descriptive statement when he says that identity *isn't* what matters for survival, but at the same time also combines it with a requirement that we change our stance to identity: identity *shouldn't* be what matters for survival. This dimension of Parfit's whole theory has already become obvious in the early article just mentioned. Parfit sees a change in our orientation – away from identity right up to survival without identity – as the possibility of mitigating our fear of death (cp. Parfit 1979: 97). A likewise famous passage from *Reasons and Persons* clearly expresses this dimension of Parfit's deliberations. Referring to the result of his deliberations that personal survival is gradual and not a case of identity, he asks the reader (Parfit 1989: 281):