

## Lose yourself

The first part of Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984) is devoted to 'Self-Defeating Theories'. By 'theory' he means 'plan of action' (p 3 – 'Different moral theories, and different theories about rationality, give us different *substantive* aims'). By 'self-defeating' he means that a theory T, which tells us to pursue certain 'T-given aims' will be self-defeating 'if someone tries to achieve his T-given aims, these aims will be, on the whole, worse achieved' (p 5). (Actually, Parfit says that in such a case T will be *indirectly* self-defeating: but that is not a subtlety that we need bother with here.)

This is a bit abstract, but it is not hard to think of plans of action that are self-defeating in this sense. 'Find love' is a self-defeating plan of action. Someone who goes out every night with the intention of finding the one that they can spend the rest of their lives with is less likely to succeed in achieving that aim than someone who couldn't care less about finding love: the person who is actively searching for love will come across as so needy and pathetic that they will put potential partners off, who will – by contrast – be more attracted to the person who is seemingly playing hard to get, but is actually not playing any game at all. 'Find happiness' is another self-defeating plan of action. It is a commonplace of human experience that happiness is a side-effect, and not something that can be directly aimed at. If you directly focus on 'being happy' two things will happen: (i) you will be so uncertain where happiness is to be found, from all the options available to you, that the effort involved in trying to evaluate which option will make you happy will make you unhappy; (ii) when you finally plump for a particular option, you will spend so much time worrying 'Am I happy? Could I have been happier doing something else?' that you will be unhappy. Finding happiness is achieved by relentlessly focussing on almost anything else than finding happiness, and finding happiness in achieving that something else.

The plan of action that Parfit considers – in terms of whether it is self-defeating – is what he calls 'the *Self-interest Theory*, or *S*', which tells each person to pursue 'the outcomes that would be best for himself, and what would make his life go, for him, as well as possible' (p 3). I think most students adopt *S* as their plan of action – do whatever will make my life go as well as possible. In certain contexts, adopting *S* as one's plan of action will be self-defeating. The most familiar example is the Prisoner's Dilemma situation where A and B have both been arrested by the police for committing a crime C (which A and B are actually guilty of). The police don't have enough evidence against A and B to charge them with committing crime C with any prospect of a successful conviction. The only chance the police have of convicting A and B of crime C is to get one or both of them to confess. So the police separate A and B and offer each of them a deal: 'If neither of you confess to committing crime C, then we will charge both of you with a lesser offence that we know that both of you are guilty of and you will both go to prison for 2 years. However, if *you* confess that both of you committed crime C *and* your partner *doesn't*, we will let you go and use your confession to send your partner to prison for 10 years. If you both confess to committing crime C, then both of you will go to prison for committing crime C for 5 years.' Things will go best for A *and* B if *neither* of them confess (that way, they will only serve 2 years in prison), but the way the Prisoner's Dilemma is set up, if *each* adopt *S* as their plan of action then each will end up confessing to committing crime C (the risk of getting a 10 year sentence by not confessing when the other confesses will be too high to run, and the possibility of walking free by confessing when the other does not will be too good to turn down), with the result that they will each end up going to prison for 5 years – 3 more years than they would have served if they had each kept schtum. Had A and B adopted some other plan of action rather than *S* – such as 'Never betray your friends, no matter what the cost' – then they would have been

better off: neither would have confessed and A and B would have just spent 2 years in jail, rather than 5.

Parfit does not think that examples like these condemn *S* as a plan of action (p 11) because *S* tells people who adopt *S* as their plan of action to adopt the *dispositions* that will make things go as well as possible, and these dispositions may sometimes require someone to act in a *self-denying* way – as is the case in the Prisoner’s Dilemma situation. So it may be that there is nothing *ultimately* self-defeating about aiming to act in the way that will make things go best for yourself – but in order to succeed in achieving that aim, you may need to forget about making things go best for yourself, and focus on doing something else instead. What I want to suggest is that this is the position that most students find themselves in – a student who is explicitly concerned to do what is best for him or herself will tend to do less well in terms of achieving that aim than a student who has some other disposition. So if you want to do what is best for yourself as a student, the best thing to do may be to *forget about yourself* and focus on some other goal instead.

It is easy to see how focussing on *S* – doing what will make things go best for oneself – might result in a student defeating him or herself in achieving *S*. For example, law students will tend to do better in their end of year exams if they have the ability to write great essays. But you can’t learn to write great essays just by reading a chapter in a book like *Letters to a Law Student* about how to write an essay – you have to develop the skill yourself, by writing lots and lots of essays. This is tiresome and frustrating work, with no assurance of success at the end of it. It is therefore easy to see how someone who is relentlessly focussed on doing whatever will make things go best for themselves will end up rebelling against the discipline required to learn to write great essays and will end up thinking that doing something – *anything* – else is far more likely to be in their best interests. However, had they learned to *lose themselves*, and devote themselves – almost as an act of love – to doing whatever was necessary to producing some beautiful, well-worked out essays, regardless of the cost involved, then they would in fact have done far better for themselves (in terms of their long-term prospects) – by the time of the exams, they would have been in a much better position to impress the examiners and get the sort of grades that open all sorts of doors on leaving university.

The same is true of virtually every aspect of a student’s life – a student’s best interests require that they cultivate the disposition to sacrifice short-term gains in favour of the uncertain prospect of long-term success. But that is a hard disposition to develop in someone who has adopted *S* as their plan of action. They would be better off – in terms of achieving what *S* tells them to achieve – not to think about *S* but instead think of themselves as self-denying servants of whatever subject they are studying: devoted to doing whatever is required to promote and advance knowledge of their subject. If they can’t do this, then they are in danger of ending up like Pogo, the subject of Walt Kelly’s eponymous cartoon strip, with their own egos creating a constant and inevitable gap between their aims and their achievements.

