

1. Some Terminology

WORLD-SETS

Reality might be structured in two ways. There could be only a *single world*. Or reality could be composed of a *set of worlds*, which each enjoy their own independent existence, causally isolated from one another. Since the single world case is equivalent to a set which includes only one world, we can simplify things by just talking about sets of worlds, or world-sets.

KINDS OF POSSIBILITY

For Parfit, **local possibilities** are world-possibilities: different ways in which particular worlds might vary. For instance, a particular world (**2P**) might have 2 planets, whereas another possible world (**8P**) has 8 planets, and another possible world (**0P**) doesn't have any planets at all.

Global possibilities are world-set-possibilities: different ways in which possible worlds can be combined into sets of worlds which might constitute reality. For instance, it's possible that reality consists of only one world: [2P]. It's also possible that reality contains three different worlds: [2P, 8P, 0P].

So local possibility maps onto a set of all possible worlds. And global possibility maps onto a set of possible world-sets: Local Possibility Set: {2P, 8P, 0P, ...}, Global Possibility Set: {[2P], [2P, 8P, 0P], ...}

2. Parfit's Two Questions

Parfit is mostly concerned with global possibilities. Given all the global possibilities, we can ask two kinds of questions:

Q1: Which world-set obtains?

Q2: Why does *that* world-set obtain rather than some other world-set?

Parfit thinks Q1 and Q2 are related: "If some possibility would be less puzzling, or easier to explain, we have more reason to think that it obtains." (420)

3. Some Views

Q1 VIEWS

Answers to Q1 will correspond to one of the uncountably many global possibilities. A few noteworthy possibilities:

Null possibility: Nothing ever exists.

All-Worlds possibility: Every conceivable world exists.

Best-World possibility: The single best world exists.

Good-Worlds possibility: Reality includes all worlds whose existence would be better than non-existence.

Q2 VIEWS

Brute Fact View: Whichever world-set obtains, there's no reason why it obtains rather than some other world-set. Reality *just is* whatever world-set happens to exist, and that's the end of the story.

The Brute Fact View might be understood as the view that there simply isn't an answer to Q2, that there isn't any selection process that determines/explains why reality is as it is. So this 'explanation' could apply to *any* actual world-set at all. Other views will help explain *particular* Q1 views by identifying the "special feature"—what Parfit calls a **Selector**—of the actual world-set that explains why that world-set was "selected".

Null Selector View: The Null possibility obtains because this is the simplest, "easiest" option.

Maximalist Selector View: The All-Worlds possibility obtains because it makes reality as full as it can be.

Axiarchic Selector View: Whichever world-set obtains, it obtains because it's the *best* world-set.

There are other plausible Selectors we could entertain, but Parfit claims, "A feature is a *plausible* Selector if we can reasonably believe that, were reality to have that feature, that would not merely happen to be true." (424)

4. Issues

THE INADEQUACY OF CAUSAL EXPLANATIONS

Causal explanations invoke causal laws. For instance, we can explain why an apple fell to the ground after being let go—that's *because* a particular law of gravity holds in this world.

But we can't provide a similar explanation for why natural laws (like the law of gravity) hold in this world. For *these* kinds of explanations—for explanations about why reality is the way it is—we can't appeal to facts about what reality is like. These are precisely the sorts of facts that we're now trying to explain.

THE INADEQUACY OF EXPLANATION VIA GOD

You might be tempted to appeal to the existence of God in order explain why reality has some particular feature. Most likely, you'd use God to explain why reality is *good* in some way.

This 'explanation' has a problem though: the very same questions we were asking of reality just become questions about God's existence, since God's existence would, itself, be a feature of the reality we're trying to explain.

THE NECESSARILY BRUTE ARGUMENT

For any proposed Selector, we can ask "Why that Selector?" You could try to appeal to the Selector explanation itself ("The Axiarchic Selector is used because that's the best selector!"), but that's just like appealing to God in order to explain God's existence. Explanations *have* to run out at some point, and, at that point, things will be the way they are *just because*. So perhaps the Brute Fact View is necessarily true.

Parfit disagrees: Selector explanations aren't themselves part of the reality which they're trying to explain (whereas as God *is* part of the reality it's meant to explain). It can be true that reality is the way it is because it's maximal and also true that there's no explanation for why reality 'prefers' maximalism.

Importantly, Parfit's response appeals to different 'levels' of explanation. His response, summed up: the lack of explanation at some higher level does not preclude explanation at a lower level. So while it may be a brute fact that the Maximalist Selector View is true, it won't be an accident or a coincidence, under this view, that the All-Worlds possibility obtains rather than some other world-set.

5. Questions

1. Why does Parfit think Q2 constrains Q1? Why are less puzzling Q1 views more likely to be true?
2. Is the local/global possibility distinction metaphysically significant? (You might think, for instance, that this distinction can be made only if we treat a certain feature of reality—the existence of parallel worlds—as metaphysically more significant than other potential features of reality.)
3. Do you buy Parfit's response to the Necessarily Brute argument? How might his opponent respond?
4. Parfit talks, throughout the paper, as if there's some process by which the actual world-set is selected from the global possibility set. Is this merely metaphorical? And if there isn't *really* some selection process, what does it mean for some feature of reality to be a Selector?