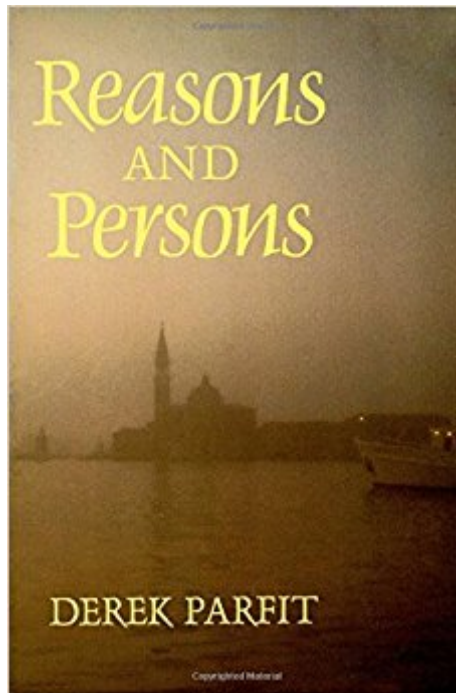




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Reasons And Persons



Synopsis

Challenging, with several powerful arguments, some of our deepest beliefs about rationality, morality, and personal identity, Derek Parfit claims that we have a false view about our own nature. It is often rational to act against our own best interests, he argues, and most of us have moral views that are self-defeating. We often act wrongly, although we know there will be no one with serious grounds for complaint, and when we consider future generations it is very hard to avoid conclusions that most of us will find very disturbing.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This isn't an easy book either to read or to review, and I don't expect I'll be able to provide an adequate summary of it here. But it's one of those massively important books that there's just no way to get around. It's easily the most weighty and thorough work of utilitarian ethics since Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics*, and it has something of Sidgwick's spirit of judicious reasonableness. Derek Parfit exploded onto the scene with this book in 1984. His work is a goldmine of helpful reflections on, and criticisms of, our ordinary notions of moral behavior, rationality, and personality. The work is divided into four major parts. In the first, he argues that many of our common-sense moral theories are "self-defeating" in the manner of a Prisoner's Dilemma (which, by the way, is the part that first interested me in the book). In the second, he considers the relations between rationality and time and worries about how we should take the past and the future into ethical account. In the third, he offers a theory of personal identity and its relations to morality. In the fourth, he considers the role that future generations ought to play in our moral deliberations. Well,

sure enough, that's not an adequate summary. I haven't even begun to convey the sheer virtuosity with which Parfit raises objections, makes distinctions, brings out difficulties that are so un-obvious that nobody ever noticed them before, and generally develops his arguments with clarity and vigor. Heck, I haven't even adequately conveyed his views themselves. So I guess you'll just have to do what I did: read the book. If you have any interest in ethics, you're going to have to read it sometime. So get a copy, put it on your bookshelf, take it down and browse through it once in a while.

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