

## REDUCTIONISM: FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE POLITICAL

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Wednesday 17:00-19:00  
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In this seminar we will investigate whether a theoretical framework derived from what is known in metaphysics as *reductionism about personal identity* can be extended to prove the irrationality of right-wing conspiracy theories such as *the great replacement (GR)*. Reductionism accepts that persons exist, they aren't identical with what constitutes them, but they don't obtain *in addition* to this. Thus, personal identity doesn't matter – we can have a complete account of reality that doesn't refer to the identity of persons. Can we similarly reduce the existence of the populations that GR fears getting replaced, such that what matters is only the rights of the individuals? The seminar will include training in using research tools and will provide experience in organising workshops and giving talks. It is aimed at MA and advanced BA students from philosophy and the social sciences. Knowledge of personal identity (esp. Parfit), supervenience, critique of far-right ideology welcome but *not essential*.

a) Background and relevance: Right wing movements have increased exponentially in the last decade. They are a threat to democratic political systems by promoting nationalist and racist myths. While they threaten social cohesion, in exchange, they offer exclusive identities structured around political myths surrounding the existence of super-personal entities or groups. With this they sometimes give the impression that they offer new forms of cohesion, even solidarity, to the members of this group, which serves to justify the erosion of human rights, discrimination and acts of violence. An example is *the great replacement theory (GR)*, which claims that white, Christian Europeans are being demographically and culturally replaced, usually by Muslim populations. The theory is of course not supported by quantitative evidence. However, proponents of this theory include prominent mainstream politicians (e.g., Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister of Italy; Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary; or Kais Saïed, President of Tunisia) and people in extraordinary positions of power (e.g., businessman Elon Musk). Equally, a great proportion of the incidents involving considerable political violence (i.e., terror attacks) occurring in recent years were motivated by fears fuelled by this theory.

b) Description of proposed research: This research seminar will produce transdisciplinary research that seeks to show the irrationality of the concerns voiced by such conspiracy theories, with a focus on *the GR*. It does this by analysing the social ontology that such conspiracy theories involve. It will draw on insights from politics, sociology and metaphysics. The working hypothesis is that what is known in the metaphysics of the self as *reductionism about personal identity* can be repurposed to mount a response to such right-wing myths.

The starting point will be Derek Parfit's approach to personal identity over time. The (numerical) question of personal identity over time (QoPIoT) in metaphysics is not concerned with questions such as who one is. Rather, it asks what the necessary and sufficient conditions are, such that one is the same person (i.e., is identical with oneself) today as they were yesterday. Such a criterion needs to account for the fact that people change both physically and psychologically. Parfit, one of the most prominent 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophers to have engaged with this question, developed the *reductionist* approach. This acknowledges that persons exist, they are not identical with what constitutes them (i.e., bodies and a chain of interrelated mental events), but they do not obtain *in addition* to their constituents. By developing thought experiments that involve circumstances where it can be shown that personal identity can diverge from the various criteria that are typically used to explain it, he argues that questions about personal identity are empty questions – at best they provide insights about our use of the word 'identity', rather than telling us something we didn't already

know about the world through impersonal descriptions. This being so, Parfit shows how personal identity does not matter – we can have a comprehensive account of reality that doesn't refer to the identity of persons. Parfit suggested that the consequences of this thought have political implications – namely that self-interest and wealth accumulations are not *rational* and that redistribution is justified.

Some of Parfit's ideas originate from 18<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher David Hume, who came up with what is known as the *commonwealth analogy*. Hume suggests that persons are like a commonwealth. Commonwealths are distinct from the sum total of their citizens (e.g., whether France has gone to war or the citizens of France have is a real difference) but commonwealths don't exist *in addition to* their citizens. In our research seminar we will try to invert this analogy: we will explore the hypothesis that reductionism about personhood can be repurposed as a reductionism about the entities that nationalist myths are built on. Using Derek Parfit's conceptual model, we will investigate the hypothesis that while the groups that these myths are built around – e.g., white culturally Christian Europeans – exist, the facts or issues around their existence are such that, like personal identity, they don't matter. In other words, it is irrational to care about their existence in a way that would inform public policy, as these myths imply (e.g., affording them rights, scaling back on the right and protection of refugees, immigrants etc.). This is because they don't exist in addition to what constitutes them – i.e., individuals with human rights. As with the identity of persons, we can have a complete inventory of what should rationally be considered as mattering for public policy (specifically, an inventory of those entities entitled to rights), in a way that doesn't mention them. Instead, there is a political and moral case for defending 'what matters' – i.e., individuals and their human rights, such as to defend freedom of thought, freedom of association, religion, etc.

c) Sub-questions: Regarding the structure of content, we will approach three topics. We will start by looking at Parfit's theory of personal identity. In doing this we will have to delve into more detail into the philosophical commitments of reductionism. For example, a critique that Parfit faced is the following: it's true that persons do not exist in addition to the parts that constitute them. Nor do chairs exist in addition to the wood they are made of, but we don't think this is a justification to describe the world in a way that doesn't refer to chairs, only to the materials they are made of. By extension, the danger of following Parfit's thought is that it would suggest that only the smallest particles that make up reality do matter. This, in turn leads to nihilism – it is hard to find value in anything human-size if the only things that have value are the smallest particles. While Parfit's response is convincing, we will seek to work out whether this applies to the issue we are exploring.

Second, we will explore some of the rejoinders that address metaphysical issues that have less to do with personhood and more with the strategy of reducing one entity to its constituent parts. This question leads to the notion of *supervenience*, which informs reductionism to a certain extent. This will allow us to develop a sound theoretical framework that we will use to apply to social groups in critiquing the theories in question.

Third, we will look at research coming from the social sciences on *the GR*. We will look at how best to apply our insights about reductionism to these issues. The immediate question is what exactly we refer to as reduceable or not mattering. Is it the existence of these social groups? Is it their existence as a majority? And what would be corresponding thought experiments or justifications that show their unimportance?

Moreover, we will have to address complications resulting from the differences between the ontology of persons and social and political ontologies. Such complications have to do with the compatibility between our findings and cases where certain groups, such as oppressed or marginalised groups, are afforded special rights in a way that is aimed to undo the consequences of historical oppression, inequality, sexism, racism, etc. Of course, this will have to be justified through what has already been deemed as 'what matters'. Their identity, developed through their having been oppressed, can only be secondary to 'what matters'.

Finally, we will look at the consequences for population policies from the anti-colonial perspective. A simplistic interpretation of our main hypothesis is that it justifies a settler-colonial logic. A way of dealing with this issue is to look at the justifications for exclusionary population policies, namely, the right to (national) self-determination. However, an anti-colonial understanding of self-determination suggests that this right lies dormant as long as a nation, or other group, is not subjected to domination and exploitation in ways that colonialism brought. This suggests that exclusionary population policies are only justified when this right is not dormant. In turn, this will provide a helpful complication to our account of what is reduceable and why.

d) Deliverables: The main deliverable of the research seminar will be a workshop that I will support in organising and where the participants will be presenting their findings. In addition, we will aim to invite three experts from the Berlin/Brandenburg area whose research reflects the three topics described above (e.g. Dr. Lena Masch, FU Berlin; Prof. Barbara Vetter, FU Berlin; Prof. Logi Gunnarsson, Uni Potsdam). They will be invited to give talks and engage with the students' research. The students will gain experience in: sourcing speakers, organising workshops, developing original research, and writing and presenting conference papers.

e) Impact: The research project seeks to provide a new approach to critiquing nationalist ideology, grounded in social ontology and drawing conclusions relating to what entitles matter in drawing public policy. While we will focus on a more extreme conspiracy theory, the insights will be transferrable to similar ideological commitments. Some of these could be examined in a follow-up research seminar. While this approach does not replace or exclude other approaches (e.g., one that analyses the incentives or the psychological desire to identify with such a group, quantitative approaches, etc.), it seeks to complement these by showing that the very nature of these concerns is irrational.