ABSTRACT. I examine an argument that appears to take us from Parfit’s [Reasons and Persons, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1984)] thesis that we have no reason to fulfil desires we no longer care about to the conclusion that the effect of posthumous events on our desires is a matter of indifference (the post-mortem thesis). I suspect that many of Parfit’s readers, including Vorobej [Philosophical Studies 90 (1998) 305], think that he is committed to (something like) this reasoning, and that Parfit must therefore give up the post-mortem thesis. However, as it turns out, the argument is subtly equivocal and does not commit Parfit to the post-mortem thesis. I close with some doubts about Parfit’s case for his indifference thesis.

All of us have lost some desires we used to have. These are past desires. Even though a desire is past, we may still want it fulfilled. This can occur because we have certain other preferences. For example, we might want no significant periods of our lives to be spent in fruitless efforts, and this more global desire might inspire us to, say, finish solving a mathematical puzzle we worked on for a year but in which we otherwise have lost interest. Thus, as Parfit suggests (1984, p. 150, 498), our global desires, or preferences about whole stretches of life, can provide us reason to want some of our past desires fulfilled. But it is reasonable to assume that, for at least some of our past desires, we have no preference that they be fulfilled. Let us say we are now indifferent about them. For economy of presentation we can call them PI desires – “P” to remind us that they are past and “I” because we are indifferent about them.

According to Parfit (1984), from the standpoint of our self-interest we have no reason to care whether our PI desires are fulfilled, and no reason to fulfil them were the opportunity to arise. (Again: contrast the stronger view, which Parfit rejects, that we have no reason to care whether our P desires are fulfilled.) This claim, which we might call the lost desire indifference
thesis, is important to Parfit because it is implied by his theory of practical reason – the present-aim theory. But the lost desire indifference thesis appears to be inconsistent with the common belief that post-humous events can benefit us by fulfilling our desires or harm us by thwarting our desires. Call this the post-mortem thesis. (For a fuller discussion of this thesis, see the essays in Fischer 1993; Luper 2002, 2004.) Hence, if all of this is true, Parfit will have established something surprising, namely, reason itself commits us to the view that we are neither harmed nor benefited by the impact of posthumous events on our desires. Theorists who reject the post-mortem thesis would perhaps welcome this result. But Parfit does not.

In this essay I will examine the argument that appears to take us from Parfit’s lost desire indifference thesis to the conclusion that the effect of posthumous events on our desires is a matter of indifference. I suspect that many of Parfit’s readers, including Vorobej (1998), think that he is committed to (something like) this reasoning, and that Parfit must therefore give up the post-mortem thesis. However, as it turns out, the argument is subtly equivocal and does not commit Parfit to the post-mortem thesis. I will close with some doubts about Parfit’s case for his indifference thesis.

Let us start by following the lost desire indifference thesis to one of its implications, namely, the lost desire harmlessness thesis, according to which we are not harmed by the thwarting of desires we cease to have and no longer want fulfilled, and we are not benefited when such PI desires are fulfilled. The reasoning from the one claim to the other seems straightforward so long as we make the eminently plausible assumption that we have prima facie reason to do something if it will benefit us or if it will prevent harm to us:

1. We have no reason (not even prima facie reason) to fulfil our PI desires even when we can (the lost desire irrelevance thesis).
2. If the thwarting of our PI desires harms us, or if fulfilling them benefits us, then we have prima facie reason to fulfil them when we can.