

Derek Parfit: The Philosopher's Philosopher

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Hardly the death of an academic philosopher makes a news headline. The death of Derek Parfit on January 1, 2017, was also no exception. Almost a nonevent event. What is there in the life of an academic philosopher—who was so fully soaked into the thick issues of ethics and metaphysics—that would catch the attention of a common reader? And when such a person was known to be depressingly routinized and much-less-exciting than an average intellectual life, certainly the story would appear to be a boring one. But Parfit's story wasn't boring. He was no ordinary philosopher. His was a life ingenuously lived for the pursuit of philosophical truths. Known for his works on ethics, personal identity, nature of reason, meaning of time and death, and many other fundamental philosophical problems, Parfit was perfectly a philosopher's philosopher. He will be remembered for his extraordinary rigor, clarity, and breathtaking insights into analyzing some of the most difficult and yet fascinating questions of human intellectual life.

Parfit first came into prominence with the publication of a book called *Reasons and Persons* in 1984. The book, soon after its release, created sensation among philosophers because it challenged some of the most deep-rooted beliefs and widely held theories about morality, rationality, and the identity of our existence. It almost redrew the map of modern moral philosophy by creating a common ground of interaction between issues that are as varied as that from the metaphysics of self, value theory, philosophy of rationality, and existential philosophy. Some of its thought-experiments and analogies are so profound that they have almost changed the way we tend to think about ourselves and our nature.

Suppose you met with an awful car accident and your body was completely disfigured but luckily nothing serious happened to your brain. Suppose further that a crazy physician now wants to do some exciting experiment with the aim of

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recovering the person in you. And this can be done only when your brain is divided into two halves and subsequently transplanted in the bodies of two other people who are, say, already declared brain-dead. After the successful transplantation, it is found that both the strangers cease to be who they were and start recalling, and behaving just like you. Now what do we think about you in such a situation? Are you dead or alive? Are you one of these two strangers? Are you both? Or Neither? If you were only one of them, who is the other? And if you were both, what happens when one of them dies?

Imagine there was a machine that could easily replace your cells, one by one, with the cells of Donald Trump. At the initial stage, the person who receives the cells from Trump's body would clearly be you. But at the end of the process, would that really be you—the same person, and not Donald Trump? And what happens to both Trump and you when the process is exactly in the middle?

Parfit was deeply concerned about the way we speculate our individuality and characters traits and make moral judgments based on them. Our ordinary beliefs suggest that my thoughts, feelings, and my body all belong to an underlying substance called “self,” which is in a way different from all of these, and yet it is something that makes me believe that they all are “mine.” Parfit wondered whether there really exists anything called *person* or *self* in the strict sense of the term. Perhaps there is nothing, there is no “deep further fact,” he thinks, other than some psychological connections and continuity between us and our future states. At first blush it might sound a bit depressing to realize that there is no personal identity, given that the so-called self-identical person is just a series of connections of contiguous person-stages. But at the end of the day, he believes this radically revised self-understanding is liberating and consoling. Neither the painful memory of a regrettable past nor the agonizing anxiety of an impending future of uncertainty would be a reason for human unhappiness, if it were truly the case that distinct person-stages don't really amount to an enduring person with past and future.

Interestingly Parfit was not alone in offering such a reductive and deflationary understanding of human personhood. His views are quite close to the Buddhist's doctrine of no-self (*anatta*) which claims, contrary to our common belief, that there is no permanent unchanging self or self-like substance in living beings. Though there are differences with respect to their approach—since Buddha has a pragmatic ground for its rejection, whereas Parfit has a metaphysical one—there are uncanny similarities insofar as the ethical implications of their claims are concerned. Both maintain that our rejection of enduring self-identity gives us occasions to readjust our beliefs and attitudes of what and how we ought and ought not to care about certain things in real life. It helps us shift our focus to a more impersonal, altruistic, and selfless approach of life and the world.

Philosophical writings are often considered to be difficult. But this difficulty may be of two varieties—one that is genuine and the other somewhat superficial. The superficial ones are difficult not because of their contents or subtlety. They are difficult because they resort to a language that is verbose, cumbersome, and convoluted. In the absence of logical consistency, such writings often indulge in an act of jargon creation which is at best confused and at worse confusing. Parfit's writings certainly do not fall into this category. Although he deals with some of the

most difficult and complex issues of philosophy, he always manages to articulate them in the simplest possible terms with exemplary clarity. His sentences are short, precise, and yet aesthetically pleasing.

Parfit was never worried about the volume of his work. In his illustrious career, he published only two books. But he always enjoyed being occupied with certain metaphysical questions whose answers, he believes, are relevant to what we have reason to care about. One such question that bothered him most, and it also made appearance in *Reasons and Persons*, was: “What Matters?”. These two simple words of a stale composition may sound pretty unintelligible to many, but they remained quite adamantly in his thoughts, so much so that subsequently this provocative interrogation made its reappearance as the title of his second book, *On What Matters*. In this colossal, two-volume masterpiece (1400 pages), Parfit aimed to achieve something which nobody dared to achieve in the history of moral and political philosophy. *Times Higher Education* had declared it as the “most eagerly awaited work in philosophy since Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*.”¹ Continuing his earlier works on rationality, morality, and the issue of objective truths of ethics, Parfit, in this staggeringly ambitious work, tried to reconcile the enigma of three grand moral theories—one that is grounded on the idea of duty (Kantian deontology), another grounded on consequences of action (utilitarian consequentialism) and yet another grounded in the notion of hypothetical contract (Contractarianism of T. M. Scanlon and others)—which all, according to him, apparently aim to climb different sides of the same mountain.

Whether or not Parfit has achieved what he tried to is a different issue. But the manner in which it was prepared and received by academic community was not just unprecedented but also an epoch-making event in moral philosophy. Much before the preparation of its final draft, he had circulated its chapters and sections among leading moral philosophers and gathered their comments and criticisms through different forums for further improvements. Some of the criticisms, which kept him engaged in taking the issues forward, were so integral to his project that they eventually became parts of the book. This unusual practice of making-of-a-book not only shows his commitment to dialogical engagement but also it remains as testimony to his sincerity, dedication, and zeal for achieving perfection in philosophical thinking. He was well-known as a fierce commentator who unflinching gives extensive and detailed comments on works sent to him by others. Observing his extraordinary philosophical talent, Peter Singer, one of the leading philosophers of Utilitarianism, commented on a philosophy website: “With no other philosopher have I had such a clear sense of someone who had already thought of every objection I could make, of the best replies to them, of further objections that I might then make, and replies to them too.”²

There is an overriding commonsensical belief that ethical truths are subjective—that there is no universal or objective truth about ethical claims. But Parfit strongly rebuts this. He thinks that there are genuinely obvious answers to our ethical issues,

¹ Time Higher Education: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/on-what-matters-volumes-i-and-ii/416411.article>.

² Daily Nous: <http://dailynous.com/2017/01/02/derek-parfit-1942-2017/>.

irrespective of whether or not we perceive them, just as there are obvious answers to our mathematical issues irrespective of the presence of our mathematical knowledge. And, we are quite capable of perceiving these truths with the help of our intuition and critical reasoning. He thinks that in the absence of moral truths the world would be a barren place—we would be running out of any reasons to decide how to live, and we would be acting only on our desires and instincts just like other animals.

Parfit was also passionately involved in thinking about our obligations toward poor and marginalized people. He intensely deliberated upon the reasons behind our duties toward future generation. His thoughts were immersed in the puzzles and paradoxes that emerge from questions like: Is it possible to make this planet a better place by creating additional happy people? Is there any moral obligation on the part of the existing population to create more children? Although much of his research was geared toward realizing practical implications, he was not truly a public intellectual or an activist in the conventional sense. He was deeply a private person. However, toward the end, he did participate in a campaign called *Effective Altruism* which aims to make people aware of their moral standing while asking them to donate generously for the betterment of downtrodden people.

Parfit was born in Chengdu, western China, on December 11, 1942. In 2014, he won the most prestigious Rolf Schock Prize, often considered as philosophy's equivalent of the Nobel prize, for "his groundbreaking contribution concerning personal identity, regard for future generations and analysis of the structure of moral theories." He held Visiting Professorship at New York, Harvard, and Rutgers Universities. He spent his entire career as a Senior (and later Emeritus) Research Fellow at All Soul's College, Oxford. Known for his somewhat unusual nature, Parfit was always "Mr. Parfit" for his friends and colleagues. He never bothered to earn a doctoral degree or a coveted professorial position. Often worried about his time and selection, he would always prefer to wear the same pair of black trouser and white shirt and eat similar dishes day after day. But he was never short of nourishing his interests in arts and esthetics. He was an avid photographer. He used to love taking pictures of old buildings and structures, especially the ones located in Venice and St. Petersburg. He had intense love for arts and music, and this gets often reflected in his philosophical writings.

Parfit passed away at a time when the Oxford University Press was about to release two important books of his: first, the third volume of his *On What Matters* and the second, an edited volume by Peter Singer entitled *Does Anything Really Matter: Essays on Parfit on Objectivity*. He is survived by his wife Janet Radcliffe Richards—an eminent philosopher of feminism and bioethics at the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics. In his death, the world has lost a gifted intellectual and the philosophy community a perfect philosopher.