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Peter Singer, editor
DOES ANYTHING REALLY MATTER?
Essays on Parfit on objectivity
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Derek Parfit
ON WHAT MATTERS
Volume Three
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A questionable perk of life as a professional philosopher is being the occasional recipient of unsolicited monographs by self-published amateurs. Affectionately known as "crazy books", these volumes crash the mailroom of a Philosophy Department, bearing titles like *Ethics of the Astral Plane* or *The Key To All Ontologies*. They promise answers to the deepest, oldest questions: the meaning of life, the universe and everything, unearthed without the help of experts or academic training. Once, when I made light of a recent arrival, a colleague stopped me short. He always felt bad, he said, that we did not have time to read these books. What if somewhere within them were the insights of an untutored genius, lost forever through the impatient cynicism of people like us?

I hope Derek Parfit's friends will not be offended when I say that my colleague's admonition made me think of him. The author of two wildly ambitious books in moral philosophy, *Reasons and Persons* (1984) and *On What Matters* (2011), Parfit had no formal education in the subject. He read history at Oxford, then switched to philosophy while visiting Columbia and Harvard, before returning to Oxford as a Prize Fellow at All Souls College, where he read, thought, and wrote about philosophy – amid numerous visiting appointments in the US – until his unexpected death in January 2017.

The announcement of Parfit's death inspired deep and widespread grief among philosophers. In part, this is because so many owe personal debts to his extraordinary intellectual generosity. Parfit was legendary for the speed, acuity and sheer volume of his commentary on others' work. But the grief reflects, too, Parfit's stature as perhaps the pre-eminent moral philosopher of the past fifty years. Parfit's work has had a profound impact on anglophone philosophy and it is safe to predict that its influence will persist.

Parfit was prodigiously inventive, overflowing with ideas. But some are especially central. The first, and still the most significant, is that our identity over time and distinctness from one another are less substantial, both metaphysically and ethically, than many of us suppose. This idea is what lies behind a passage from Parfit's first book, *Reasons and Persons*, quoted in almost every obituary: "When I believed [in a deep fact of personal identity], I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air".

Parfit's view about the unimportance of personal identity is hard to formulate briefly and the arguments in support of it are intricate, resting on thought-experiments about malfunctioning *Star Trek*-style teleporters, actual experiments involving brain bisection, and mash-ups that speculate about the transplant of cerebral hemispheres. The basic idea is that, in the absence of an immaterial soul, what unifies me over time – what makes me, now, the same person who started writing this review last week – is a web of relations between events in the intervening days. The most important of these relations are psychological, matters of continuity and connection in memory, belief and will, which I can bear to other people, too, though I typically do so to vastly lesser degrees. If this is all there is to being me, Parfit argues, the "separateness of persons" is diminished, and the rational response is a corresponding diminution in self-interest, a greater willingness to sacrifice myself for the greater good. There is a path from the insubstantial nature of personal identity to a more altruistic ethics.

There are notable gaps in Parfit's reasoning. His argument neglects the view that we are fundamentally human: our identity and persistence are a function of biology, not mental life. That is a glaring omission. Writing about personal identity without addressing the idea that we are animals of a certain species is like attempting to escape from a locked room without ever trying the key. But what is now called "animalism" was not well-articulated when Parfit was writing and its subsequent development owes much to him. Nor does he ignore it in later work. Parfit objects to animalism in a recent essay, alarmingly titled "We Are Not Human Beings". In *Reasons and Persons*, his clipped prose, with its repetitive sentences, poetic cadence and sly humour becomes the vehicle for a depth and range of insight rarely matched in recent philosophy. The upshot is an Anglicized version of the Buddhist "no-self" view, a philosophy that could change your life.

Fast forward almost thirty years, and as passages from *Reasons and Persons* were being chanted by Tibetan monks, Parfit published the first two volumes of his long-awaited sequel, *On What Matters*. It too is metaphysical, but what interests Parfit now is not the metaphysics of persons but of reasons for acting. According to Parfit, there are objective truths about how we should live, what there is reason to do, and what is right and wrong, that are irreducible, causally inert, and wholly independent of us. Not only are these truths independent of what we think and of our nature as human beings, the reasons that govern us are independent of what we want. None of this prevents us from knowing what they are. Through this austere lens, Parfit frames a theory of right action as obedience to principles it would make sense for everyone to legislate for all.

Volume One of *On What Matters* is devoted to the interpretation of this gnomic principle, which adapts and renovates a formula from Kant: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law". But this is not the subject of the books under review. They focus instead on Parfit's "non-reductive cognitivism", his belief in ethical truths that are utterly unlike truths about anything else in the world. Peter Singer's authoritative collection, *Does Anything Really Matter?*, includes a range of responses to Parfit, in turns admiring, critical and conciliatory. Volume Three of *On What Matters* gives Parfit's replies, along with some striking new material on the morality of causing and preventing harm.

The first thing to say about Parfit's "metaethics" – his theory of the meaning, metaphysics and epistemology of ethical claims – is that, unlike his dramatic conclusions about the ethics of identity, it is not exactly new. The idea that ethical truths are objective and irreducible was commonplace among the British moral philosophers of the early twentieth century: G. E. Moore, W. D. Ross, and Parfit's favourite, Henry Sidgwick. In his *Principia Ethica*, a bible of the Bloomsbury Group, Moore argued that the ethical sense of "good" is utterly unanalysable. It stands for a property whose nature cannot be explained in other terms. That is what Parfit believes about his central concept, the concept of a "normative reason", a consideration that counts in favour of something, as when there is reason to act in a certain way, to want a given outcome, or to hold a particular belief.

Parfit's argument for irreducibility begins by dismissing "Analytical Naturalism", which aims to specify what "reason" means in naturalistic, non-normative terms. Like many philosophers, Parfit is sceptical of this approach. If we can say in other terms what it is to be a reason, it is by doing metaphysics, not linguistic analysis. That is how we learn that heat is molecular kinetic energy, for example – not by analysing words but by investigating its nature. For Parfit, what blocks this approach to reasons is the principle that, when it is informative to learn that what is A is also B, (even though being A is the same as being B), the meaning of either "A" or "B" can be further analysed. For instance, in the case of heat, it is informative to learn that what is hot has high molecular kinetic energy because, even though these terms pick out a single property, they do so in different ways. The meaning of "hot" can be analysed, Parfit thinks, in terms of the causes and effects of heat. This sets the stage for his central argument. Since the meaning of "reason" cannot be further analysed and it is informative to learn, in other terms, when something is a reason, it follows by Parfit's principle that the property of being a reason cannot be identified with any property expressed in those terms. Unlike heat, which reduces to molecular kinetic energy, being a reason does not reduce to anything else.

As you might guess, the details of this argument need careful scrutiny. This is difficult terrain, even for experts. The force of Parfit's reasoning turns on whether his principle about information, identity and meaning is true. But the truth of this principle is far from obvious and Parfit does not argue for it. It is hard not to be dismayed by this omission. One of the defining achievements of so-called "analytic philosophy" was a great advance in clarity about the dimensions of meaning, through the work of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, followed by, among others, Saul Kripke and Gareth Evans. None of this work is cited by Parfit. His approach to the philosophy of language has an autodidactic quality, as he reinvents its basic tools from scratch. It is difficult to make progress without standing on the shoulders of giants, and it is inefficient, too.

A consequence of Parfit's homemade apparatus is that an awful lot of space in these volumes is devoted to misunderstandings between Parfit and his critics. Numerous chapters attempt to translate from one proprietary idiom of meanings, concepts and properties into another. This is especially true in Parfit's exchanges with Peter Railton, who is more sympathetic than Parfit is to reductionism in ethics, and with Allan Gibbard, who is more puzzled by the idea of ethical truth. Parfit is encouraged by the fact that, after meticulous retranslation, there is less disagreement than he feared between his own position and those of his interlocutors.

Anxiety about disagreement is a central theme of *On What Matters*. Parfit is disturbed by the idea that his view conflicts with those of other philosophers, since they are no less likely to get things right. He concentrates on disagreements with contemporaries like Gibbard, Railton and Bernard Williams. With the partial exceptions of Hume, Kant and Nietzsche, Parfit does not address his relationship with earlier philosophers. Most of these philosophers reject his non-reductive cognitivism. There are different reasons for this, but one common puzzlement is expressed in the rhetorical question: "If facts about reasons are utterly irreducible and independent of us, why should we care about what they are?" Parfit is puzzled by this puzzlement, hearing in it only the asinine query: "Why should I care about the things I have reason to care about?" But the question is more plausibly understood as a demand that reasons bear some intelligible relation to our nature as agents or as human beings. On Parfit's approach, there is no such relation.

Despite beginning as a historian, Parfit does not engage in any serious way with the history of ethics. At the end of *Reasons and Persons*, he writes about the future of moral philosophy: "Disbelief in God, openly admitted by a majority, is a recent event, not yet completed. Because this event is so recent, Non-Religious Ethics is at a very early stage. We cannot yet predict whether, as in Mathematics, we will all reach agreement. Since we cannot know how Ethics will develop, it is not irrational to have high hopes". But non-religious ethics is not especially young. It is about as old as Western philosophy. What is relatively young is the attempt to make sense of ethics in the aftermath of the Enlightenment. For some philosophers, this means going back to Aristotle; for others, it means turning to Hume or Kant. Perhaps these are all wrong turns, as Parfit must believe. But their proponents are neglected, not refuted, by his work.

In principle, Parfit's disengagement from the history of analytic and earlier philosophy could be generative. It could make room for bold new ideas. But it is also a liability. While there are moments of genius in *On What Matters*, there are moments that frustrate as well. Professional philosophers will make time to read it; they will study it and learn from it. Those less patient and more cynical may turn instead to *Reasons and Persons*, to the passages chanted by Tibetan monks, and to a picture of themselves at once perplexing and persuasive, beautiful and bizarre.