



The Lure of the Peak

Book Review of
Derek Parfit's *On What Matters: Volume I*
and
On What Matters: Volume II

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Part 1 of 2

I.

The idea that ethics is the province of religion lingers even in relatively secular societies. On a recent Saturday morning, the principal news radio station in Berlin reported a dilemma facing German politicians as they attempt to craft educational policy: children must be required to take classes in religion, or their ethical

education will inevitably be neglected. Yet the connection presupposed by the politicians has often been questioned. From Plato on, most philosophers have denied the possibility that the will of a deity could have anything to do with what is required of us. Although philosophy has shaped the ethical teachings of the main Western religions, many of the most influential ethical thinkers have been dedicated to explaining and defending principles in ways that are entirely independent of religious doctrine. If the puzzled politicians had been aware of their own rich intellectual tradition, they would have found easy ways of resolving their dilemma.

For over two millennia, philosophical ventures in moral theory have left their mark on everyday thought and on concepts taken for granted in social and political life. Plato and Aristotle, Hume and Adam Smith, Kant and Hegel, Bentham and Mill have shaped the lives of people who would not recognize their names, people who make claims about virtue and vice, duty and obligation, the proper form of a market economy, and the appropriate sphere of legal protection. Nor does the influence end in the late nineteenth century. G.E. Moore's assertion that human relationships and beautiful things are the sources of intrinsic value inspired members of the Bloomsbury circle as they attempted to free themselves from the claustrophobia induced by Victorian morality. More recently, John Rawls and Amartya Sen have explored new directions for social and political theory, and Peter Singer has raised serious questions about our treatment of other animals and about the responsibilities of the affluent few toward the many people who live in acute poverty. Even in an age in which the relevance of philosophy to any aspect of culture beyond its own arcane discussions is frequently (and justifiably) questioned, ethical theory would seem to be one area in which philosophers still have important things to contribute.

At the heart of ethical theory are issues that seem inescapable, and that no other field of inquiry promises to answer. How ought we to act? What kinds of things are worth wanting? What type of person should you aspire to be? Many religious people suppose that there is an authoritative source of answers to these questions. They are not moved by Plato's cogent proof that the will of a being, however powerful, could not ground any moral duty. Nor are they persuaded by Kant's further development of the same theme: moral reliance on the commands of another presupposes that the commander is not only powerful but also good; hence those who obey must already have standards of goodness and be able to apply them to the commander. After the twentieth century, and the many who attempted to absolve themselves on the grounds that they were only following the Leader's orders, this Kantian point would seem

especially forceful. Still, even those who continue to rely on religious authority should at the very least concede that their preferred manual of ethical instruction is profoundly incomplete. They, too, need ways of guiding their conduct when their decisions lie beyond the scope of the commandments. They might benefit, as generations of religious scholars and teachers before them have done, from the insights of philosophy.

Besides the straightforward questions about the actions, wants, and ideals of personhood, ethical theory often ventures into higher-order issues, seeking to understand the character of ethics itself. Rather than being a desertion of the more pressing problems in favor of academic theorizing, this trend could reasonably be viewed as part of a strategy for discharging ethical theory's central task. Asking how we might make sense of ethical truth and ethical knowledge, or answering the nihilist who denies that anything matters, can be a valuable initial step toward discovering what ought to be done or what is worth cherishing. Still, as in any field of inquiry, aspiring theorists should beware lest they lose all contact with the questions that provoked the line of investigation they are supposed to be continuing. Thoughtful people who turn to the "literature" in recent ethical theory may well be puzzled by the lack of connection to the practical decisions and difficulties of contemporary life, and they may harbor a suspicion (perhaps more than a suspicion) that ethical theory has become an academic game of dubious relevance.

Derek Parfit is rightly admired for the acuteness of his philosophical intelligence and his dedication to a thorough exploration of the questions he takes up. His first book, *Reasons and Persons*, which appeared in 1984, was widely viewed as an outstanding contribution to a cluster of questions in metaphysics and ethics, although its crowning achievement was, I think, its fourth part, in which he offered a penetrating series of arguments about the aggregation of value: how should we compare a state in which some number of people enjoy lives of high quality with a state in which considerably more people live at a slightly less exalted level? Questions such as this one bear on topics in welfare economics and social choice theory (although Parfit does not make the connection explicitly). Since he has done so much to shape the character of contemporary ethical theory—particularly by introducing concepts and methods now central to academic philosophical ethics—Parfit's new book has been eagerly anticipated. Moreover, its sheer size—the two volumes of *On What Matters* comprise 1,365 pages—invites the thought that this is a *magnum opus*, a book that might do in our times what Moore accomplished a century ago, or what

Kant achieved in the German Enlightenment—though both of them with many fewer pages.

One prediction is almost undeniable. *On What Matters* will be the subject of innumerable graduate seminars, a book to be pored over for weeks and months by apprentice philosophers and their mentors, a source for journal articles that will refine a principle here or challenge an argument there. It will be a paradigm in the original, uncorrupted sense of the word, one that will give rise to a professional practice of philosophizing. But will it—or should it—have an impact on broader cultural discussions, shaping future thoughts about what we ought to do or want or aspire to become?

II.

It is a virtue of Parfit's book that it aims to cover the traditional domain of ethical theory. Its discussions of questions about the character and status of ethics are integrated with substantive conclusions about which actions are right or wrong, and which desires are worth having. Parfit opposes nihilists (who think that nothing matters), social relativists (who suppose that what matters depends on society), and subjectivists (who claim that what matters is a function of what people want). In the terms that he favors, there are objective standards for "what we have most reason" to want and to do: the awfulness of pain, for example, gives us an objective reason to avoid being in agony. It is not at all evident, however, that posing the issues in terms of "reasons" is particularly helpful, or that the question of "what we have most reason to do" is an improvement on asking, "what, all things considered, ought we to do," because the notion of "something's being a reason for someone" remains elusive and obscure, despite Parfit's many attempts to get it clear and right.

In any case, Parfit's central task, undertaken in the first volume, is to think systematically about these objective reasons and to formulate a "supreme principle of morality." This is an enterprise in which he takes himself to be continuing the philosophical tradition, particularly as exemplified by his "heroes" Kant and Sidgwick. (The latter's *Methods of Ethics*—a "great, drab book," in Parfit's words—developed the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill in ways that absorb ideas from rival traditions.) On the face of it, the thought that morality should have a "supreme principle" is puzzling, for it is not obvious that our ethical life can be subsumed under any single formula. Some people worry about the idea that physical theory can be distilled into some mighty equation, taken to be the core of a "theory of everything," but the field of ethics

appears even less susceptible to such spectacular unification. If ten commandments are unable to suffice, how can we hope to manage with one?

Many of Parfit's remarks indicate that he thinks of ethical theorizing as analogous to what occurs in theoretical science, but his conception of a "supreme principle" is more subtle and more promising. As we learn when he begins to entertain serious candidates for the role, the fundamental law of ethical theory is to be framed in ways that facilitate its application to human decisions: "*The Kantian Contractualist Formula*: Everyone ought to follow the principles whose universal acceptance everyone could rationally will. This formula might be what Kant was trying to find: the supreme principle of morality." Like several of the ideas proposed in Kant's seminal *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morality*, Parfit's formula attains great generality by offering a test someone might apply in making a decision of any sort.

Later, in the second volume, Parfit makes it clear that his unified theory of ethics is not supposed to decide every ethical issue. He does not believe that all ethical questions have determinate answers. In this regard he cites issues about "the ethics of population or the morality of war." For this reason, whatever tests are enjoined by the "supreme principle" may not always be applicable: the task, presumably, is to supply criteria adequate for resolving only the ethical questions that are in principle answerable.

The central claim of *On What Matters* is Parfit's proposal of the "Triple Theory." It attempts to characterize the wrongness of acts.

An act is wrong if and only if, or *just when*, such acts are disallowed by some principle that is

- (1) one of the principles whose being universal laws would make things go best,
- (2) one of the only principles whose being universal laws everyone could rationally will....
- (3) a principle that no one could reasonably reject.

Plainly, these formulations involve concepts about which many readers (and many philosophers) may doubt their own fluency; and Parfit devotes pages, sections, and entire chapters to attempts to explain some of these concepts. Even in advance of working through his discussions, however, his statement of the Triple Theo-

ry brings out the structure of his ideas. Although the characterization of wrongness appears to involve three different tests, he claims that the three criteria give the same results—acts debarred by one would be ruled out by the other two. The point of exploring and offering all three is to reveal an unexpected convergence among three major traditions in moral thought. In an image he employs repeatedly, the history of ethical theory is described as a series of attempts to climb a mountain from different sides—and now that we are closer to the peak, it is possible to recognize that these are attempts on the same mountain and that the routes are coming together.

The three traditions of thought whose convergence Parfit wishes to affirm are consequentialism, Kantianism, and contractualism. Consequentialists begin from the idea that some states of affairs are better or worse than others, and construe right actions as those tending to produce outcomes that are as good as possible. The version of consequentialism favored by Parfit is one that focuses on general principles rather than specific actions: instead of declaring that an action is right if it generates the best results, he understands right actions as those commended by rules, or “universal laws,” that “make things go best.” Kantians suppose that the principles of morality are those that could rationally be willed to hold as universal laws—or, to come closer to one of Kant’s original formulations, those laws that would be agreed upon for their self-governance by a community of rational beings. And contractualists suppose that the principles of morality are those that would be agreed on in a discussion under some type of ideal conditions.

Much of the work in the first volume of *On What Matters* consists in efforts to make some of the central notions of these three traditions clear and precise, and, on that basis, to formulate the most defensible version of each. And after Parfit has argued that the principles are equivalent, we are supposed to conclude that this unexpected convergence of approaches often viewed as starkly incompatible redounds to the credit of the Triple Theory, and that Parfit’s—and moral philosophy’s—work is done.

WHY, THEN, is there a second volume, still longer than the first? Partly because of an accidental feature: an earlier and shorter version of Parfit’s ideas was presented as a set of Tanner Lectures at Berkeley, and, by the conditions of those lectures, publication of a developed version should be accompanied by the discussions of distinguished commentators and the replies of the lecturer. Thus the second volume opens with a different set of voices, three be-

longing to the original discussants (Susan Wolf, Allen Wood, and T.M. Scanlon) and one subsequently recruited (Barbara Herman). But after 250 pages of such exchanges, the bulk of the volume is then devoted to Parfit's attempt to explain the status of ethics. He hopes to demolish a threatening view—he calls it Naturalism—according to which the only facts are natural facts: the world contains only those things that would be described by improved versions of the full range of human, natural, and social sciences, and philosophers should dream of no more things than there are in heaven and Earth. For Naturalists, ethics either turns out to be concerned with a certain type of natural fact, or it fails as a correct description of anything. Parfit devotes great energy to distinguishing many different forms of the Naturalist idea, arguing that all are incorrect, and then offers his own preferred account of what ethics is about (it delivers a species of “non-ontological truth”) and how we can know ethical truths (we have a special ability, about which little can be said, that acquaints us with these truths). All this takes time.

A bare survey of the principal contours of *On What Matters* fosters the impression that it is a leisurely book, one that did not need to swell to its exceptional length. Such a judgment would be unwarranted. Parfit's book is noteworthy for the density of its argumentation. At almost every paragraph, readers who want to achieve a firm grip on the thoughts that he is developing will have to pause and to ponder. This is partly a matter of the difficulty of the notions that Parfit is trying to make precise, and partly a tribute to his honesty in considering alternatives and pursuing them doggedly. Yet it is also the result of the method that Parfit favors, one now prominent in ethical theory as a result of his influence.

In hundreds of staccato paragraphs, we start with some candidate principle, confront it with a story about some artificially simplified situation, announce a judgment about the way to appraise that situation, and render a verdict on the status of the principle. Many of the stories involve schematically described predicaments in which people are in danger of bodily damage or of death: trapped on rocks or by an earthquake, or lying tied to a railroad track in a tunnel (with possibilities for someone to divert an oncoming train, thereby sending it on a track through a different tunnel where some lesser number of people are bound—or even for someone to have the option of pitching a bystander from a bridge above the track, so that the train will be stopped by his body). Under the names assigned to them, these exercises in moral fiction recur throughout the web of argument. Here is an example of the dominant argumentative style, which I have selected at random:

As in *Tunnel*, however, this nondeontic reason [the awfulness of acting to bring about someone's death] could not decisively outweigh your reason to do what would save several people's lives. If *Bridge* is significantly different from *Tunnel*, as many people would believe, this difference could not, I believe, be that, since you would be killing me as a means, you would have a decisive *non*-deontic reason not to act in this way. This feature of this act might give you a decisive reason not to act in this way. But it could do that, I believe, only by *making this act wrong*. This decisive reason would have to be *deontic*. If that is true, the objection we are now considering fails.

Since passages such as this invite scrutiny of Parfit's distinctions, concepts, and principles, and since they supply ample fodder for varying his preferred stories and challenging or confirming his judgments about them, the prediction I made earlier appears completely safe: *On What Matters* is a treasure trove for ethical theorists, looking to make their mark in the professional journals. Whether it can contribute to broader ethical discussions about the pressing problems that occupy people and their societies is, of course, a different matter.

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