THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Aug 2017 **Philosophy is Everybody's Business** Nº 904

The Lure of the Peak

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

PHILIP KITCHER

Part 2 of 2

III.

SOME OF THE chief anxieties about Parfit's version of ethical theory are already voiced by the commentators whose essays open his second volume. One prominent theme in the commentaries is whether Parfit's claim about the convergence of three independent traditions is surprising (and thus has the probative force he attributes to it). The critics point out, with considerable justice, that Parfit has carefully selected just those elements in the three ethical traditions that have some kinship with one another, ignoring more central features that would be far harder to reconcile. The points they raise are valuable for philosophers interested in the history of ethical theory, and particularly for those concerned with Kant's writings on morality. Parfit replies to the historical concerns at some length, but spends far less time addressing two more fundamental objections raised by his commentators.

Yet a collapse of the "surprising convergence" would seem less problematic for the Triple Theory than these two further objections. The first of them concerns the goal of the project. Owing to his fondness for thinking of ethical theory as analogous to theories in areas of the sciences, Parfit often writes as if the goal of the enterprise is to produce a collection of principles that could be more or less mechanically applied to ethical decision-making. After the Triple Theory has been fully developed, when the three traditions have shaken hands on the mountain peak, there will be a new way of guiding our ethical life: sensitive judgment will give way to accurate calculation. But would that really be an improved, ultra-efficient way of guiding our ethical life? Would it not be, rather, something entirely different—something in which the value of sensitive judgment would have been lost? Ethical decisions owe part of their value to the person's own activity of thinking through the problem, which often involves engaging with the situations and feelings of others. Judgment is not a matter of applying some formula that has been delivered by a correct and complete theory.

An alternative to Parfit's way of thinking about ethics and ethical theory would take the point of the enterprise to be one of assembling ideas that can be used both in helping people to develop into more sensitive judges and in serving as resources on occasions of judgment. Perhaps there is no single peak. Perhaps, as Susan Wolf suggests in her commentary, there is only an indefinitely extending range. Parfit is much too brief in responding to her cogent suggestion.

THE SECOND OBJECTION concerns the method employed throughout *On What Matters*. Short schematic fictions—"puzzle cases"—are used as if they were analogues of experimental results that could be used to test putative theoretical hypotheses. One deep difficulty with this method is that, for all the words that Parfit expends on attempts to clarify his central concepts, particularly the notion of a reason, the concepts finally remain imprecise, and readers must constantly struggle to decide whether his assertions about the bearing of the evidence are justified. Even more importantly, the reactions he intends us to share are strikingly different from the kinds of reports that play a valuable role in the development of the sciences: whereas the standardization of observations and experimental findings is crucial to scientific objectivity, when people offer their judgments about puzzle cases in ethics there are absolutely no standards for when they are doing it well, no serious understanding of what they are doing or how, no sense of how their judgments might be distorted by prior commitment to some ethical principle—and thus no way of knowing whether their reports have the slightest evidential worth.

Consider the case that Parfit refers to as "*Bridge*," a variant on a muchdiscussed scenario. In the canonical version, five people are bound to a track and threatened by the approach of a train. On the rail of the bridge over the track sits a fat man, whose heft would be sufficient to stop the train. Would it be right to push him from his perch onto the track below, thus using him as a buffer to protect the five? Of course, if you imagine yourself on the bridge faced with this choice, all sorts of awkward and practical questions arise. Would you be able to dislodge the fat man? (For the puzzle case to work, you have to be of lesser girth—otherwise you would have the option of sacrificing yourself.) If you pushed him, would he fall in a way that would halt the train? Is there some other way to prevent the deaths—a signal that can be given or a switch that can be thrown? Could you persuade the fat man to jump? Could you say, "Fat man, let us leap together"?

To avoid some of these questions, Parfit's variant of the story stipulates a remotecontrol device that you can use to launch someone from the bridge on to the track. In this way he seeks to dodge or escape certain questions—but his modification introduces many others. How can you tell what will happen if you use whatever device you have? Could you stop the train simply by opening the trap, without anything falling through? Can you signal to the potential victim and arrange for some appropriate substitute object to fall through the trap? Are there other devices you should seek that would allow you to communicate directly with the driver,

or to stop the train in less messy ways? Your response to any actual situation would depend on how you would answer or address questions such as these—on how you would cast around in attempting to avoid any death or injury (just as, in the original story, you would seek alternatives to the stark choice assigned to you). Parfit's emendation of the canonical scenario is guided by no standard of objectivity for evoking reliable responses, and thus it generates further versions of the disease it is intended to cure.

You cannot respond to the imagined predicament without thinking hard, but hard thinking leads through a cloud of questions to a state of confusion. A few conditions are simply declared: the outcomes are known and the options limited. But since that sort of certainty and limitation is exceedingly remote from the circumstances in which we make our practical decisions, our judgmental capacities cannot be put to work in their normal ways. Readers are pitched into a fantasy world, remote from reality, in which our natural reactions are sharply curtailed by authorial fiat. When we are called on to render a verdict, the dominant feeling is a disruption of whatever skills we possess, and a corresponding distrust of anything we might say-often publicly visible when lecturers ask their audiences to respond to some puzzle case: only partisans of some particular theory answer confidently, while the rest sit in uncomfortable silence. The reader may even be left with a deep sense of unease that matters of life and death are to be judged on the basis of such cursory and rigged information. (Allen Wood makes similar points trenchantly in his contribution to Parfit's book. This part of Wood's critique goes unaddressed by Parfit.)

Parfit's only defense of his use of puzzle cases occurs in passing, in a much earlier passage in which he proposes that thought-experiments are as valuable in ethics as they are in the sciences. The comparison prompts an obvious response—that many scientists think of thought-experiments as motivational rather than probative, as preludes to *real* experiments that will elicit genuine evidence. (It should also be noted that the great thoughtexperiments in the history of science occur in domains in which the questions can be precisely defined.) And matters are made even worse when the puzzle cases are used to interrogate the reasons that an imagined agent within the story might have for acting in a particular way. The vagueness of Parfit's concept of a reason—a concept he takes to be indefinable—vitiates any serious attempt to survey the range of reasons someone has at his disposal. Even after the many claims about reasons Parfit makes, a sensitive reader should still wonder if those claims are justified. Moreover, his extensive discussion of issues about ethical truth and ethical

knowledge renders our capacities for arriving at judgments, whether about individual situations or about general principles, so mysterious that the reader's sense of hopeless floundering is further compounded.

After his lengthy attempt to scotch all naturalistic approaches to ethics, Parfit addresses the worry that admitting "non-natural facts" is to venture into an obscure and possibly incoherent metaphysics. His solution is that some truths (including ethical truths) are true in some "non-ontological sense," and that "we form many true beliefs because these beliefs are intrinsically credible, or because we are aware of facts that give us reasons to have them." In short, we possess an ability—Parfit thinks of it as shaped by natural selection, but it is probably better to view it as the product of natural selection and sociocultural learning—that can be exercised, in ways we do not understand at all, to yield a special sort of truth that we also do not understand at all.

It is hard to feel confident about the existence of such an ability, or that our judgment results from its proper exercise, especially when we are putting it to work on an artificial case in which our natural thoughts are constrained in many ways and when the verdict we are to provide concerns imprecisely formulated principles. Parfit's best-developed attempt to defend his postulated ability is to draw on an analogy with mathematical knowledge. Yet many things mathematicians once took to be selfevident were later rejected by their successors, and principles now judged basic emerged from a complicated history of mathematical exploration. In mathematics, self-evidence is achieved, not given.

So we have not been given any good reason to think that the Triple Theory is the true ethical theory. While the traditions from which Parfit draws have supplied useful resources for ethical judgment, his versions of their central ideas are not especially precise, nor readily applicable, nor well-supported by the evidence that he offers. *On What Matters* does not contribute—perhaps it does not intend to contribute—to fostering ethical discussion and ethical practice in the broader world.

IV.

IS THERE A BETTER alternative? I believe there is, and it is a version of the Naturalism that Parfit so vigorously opposes.

Parfit is gripped by a particular picture of ethical knowledge, one in which people can discover ordinary kinds of facts by ordinary kinds of means, the sorts of methods used by ordinary observers and investigators, as well as by the most insightful researchers, methods that deliver information about mice and molecules, murder, monsoons, and mayonnaise. In his view, the task of understanding ethical knowledge is either that of building a bridge from these facts to ethical judgments or of finding some separate source for those judgments. After failing to find a bridge from facts to values, Parfit sets out on his quest for his (nebulous) source of ethical knowledge. Yet for at least a century, philosophers have known that this kind of picture of knowledge is mistaken. Human beings begin in the middle, with a mix of beliefs, and the proper topic concerns the grounds for a change of belief. People acquire, early in their lives, a complex collection of ideas about the natural world and about how they should think, feel, and act. As they grow, they change their minds, sometimes producing large collective transformations in the prevailing views about what is to be done.

According to a well-worn joke, an American traveling in Ireland spends a long time trying to find the remote village he aims to visit. At last he stops to ask one of the local inhabitants how to get there. And he is told: "Well, I shouldn't start from here if I was you." The philosophical predicament is often quite similar. Ethics might be better understood, and ethical life might be improved, if we began with the right questions.

One version of Naturalism starts by thinking of ethics not as the search for a single immutable all-serving principle, but rather as an entirely human endeavor, a project begun by our remote ancestors tens of thousands of years ago and continuing indefinitely into the future. There is no mountain to climb, no final compendium of ethical truths, but only a central human predicament, from which we escaped by learning—imperfectly—to regulate our own conduct. The philosophical study of this project must absorb the insights of various natural and human sciences, bits of evolutionary biology and primatology, of psychology and anthropology, of archaeology and history. (Naturalism should be elaborated broadly, recognizing the potential contributions of all rigorous forms of inquiry across the entire spectrum, from art history and anthropology to zoology; there is no need for Naturalists to lapse into the scientism of taking some particular area of physical science as fundamental.) Sensible conclusions cannot be reached by pitting imprecise principles against fanciful cases, but rather by

looking, as carefully and as comprehensively as we can, at the details of ethical practice and ethical change.

Our ancestors once lived in small groups, mixed by age and sex, in the fashion of contemporary chimpanzees. To participate in this type of social life, they required some capacity for identifying and responding to the desires of the other members of the band, but the limitations of that capacity made their lives together tense and fragile. Self-regulation began as a social technology, directed at overcoming the limitations of our altruism. Rules for conduct, discussed within the group, came to govern human lives. Through a long period of time, probably at least fifty thousand years, different small societies engaged in social experiments. The ethical practices that exist today are the heirs of the most successful of these experiments.

Along the way many things happened. The initial framework of rules and motivating devices was probably very crude: the first commands were likely focused on the most prominent causes of social tension, giving rise to prescriptions for sharing scarce resources and proscriptions against initiating violence; band members were motivated to comply through their fear of punishment. Subsequent generations added more subtle ways of inducing conformity, recruiting emotions of solidarity, shame, and pride, feelings of respect and awe, often directed toward a powerful being viewed as the source of the group's way of life. Attempts to resolve the challenges imposed by scarcity fostered a division of labor, out of which roles and institutions emerged. The extension of some protections to neighbors paved the way for an expansion of group size, and increased cooperation generated higher forms of altruism. The ethical framework familiar to us evolved gradually, through a series of small steps. The law codes that are among the earliest written documents testify to hundreds of generations of prior discussion. During recorded history ethical changes become perceptible. Although instances of ethical progress may be rare, it is hard to resist the thought that some of these modifications are progressive.

YET HOW CAN a naturalist approach make sense of a concept of ethical progress? Not by conceiving of it as the discovery of a prior and independent truth. Better to think of it as consisting in the solution of problems—as progress *from*, not progress *to*. Ethics begins as a social technology, aimed originally at making up for the limits of human altruism. Some prominent episodes in the

recorded history of ethical practice take up versions of the original problem: when slavery is abolished, when women's choices are expanded, when prejudices against certain forms of sexual expression are overcome, a prior situation in which there is a systematic failure to identify with the desires and the aspirations of other people is changed—a class of failures of altruism is resolved.

The changes come about not through recognition of some special ethical fact, hitherto unappreciated, but through the discovery of natural facts, about people, their capacities, sufferings, and aspirations, on the basis of which there are new possibilities for mutual engagement. Reformers come to see that desires that have been ignored or viewed as perverse are central to the lives of others, and through a more informed, inclusive, and sympathetic conversation, they learn how those desires can be satisfied without interfering with anyone's fundamental aims.

But the identification and overcoming of our failures of altruism is not the only mode of ethical progress. Like other forms of technology, the ethical project is not limited to the problem out of which it arose. It generates new problems as it evolves. The "ethical truths" we arrive at are those principles introduced in progressive—that is, problemsolving—transitions, and retained in subsequent progressive changes: in William James's happy phrase, "Truth happens to an idea."

The great ethical theorists, on such an account, are those who supply resources for human decisions—collective human decisions—directed at problem-solving. Many of these thinkers have both reflected extensively on the practices of the societies in which they find themselves and have been deeply immersed in the theoretical ideas of their predecessors. (In our own times, John Rawls is an outstanding example.) Whatever their intentions, they offer no final theory, no "supreme principle of morality." Moreover, although they facilitate conversation, serving as philosophical midwives, they cannot claim any special expertise in discovering ethical truth. Just as ethical practice began in negotiation within a small group, so, at its best, it continues by involving many—ideally all—human perspectives, under conditions in which each strives to accommodate the interests of all others.

WE SHOULD DISPENSE with the myth of the sage, the guru, the teacher, and the ethical expert, which has often distorted the ethical

project. The image of the moral philosopher as expert is a latecomer: in human history, by far the most prominent claims to special ethical expertise have been those of religious teachers, who have sometimes, although not always, used their alleged access to the supernatural to inscribe their own prejudices into a group's ethical code. But philosophers who reject that version of the story fall into a rival fable, according to which *they* are the people who have insight into pre-existent ethical truth, and *they* are the pioneers who climb the mountain. For all its intellectual perseverance and academic penetration, *On What Matters* remains trapped in the acceptance of this latter myth.

Whether the approach I have sketched is ultimately satisfactory (and it probably is not), I am convinced that its kind of Naturalism, and the questions that it poses, offer an important corrective to contemporary fashions in academic ethics. Although he does not construe Naturalism in terms of an interdisciplinary perspective on the ethical project, Parfit regards the forms of Naturalism he considers as a serious threat. On several occasions he remarks that, if Naturalism is true, then much of his life will have been wasted. My last disagreement with him concerns this wrenching judgment.

If Naturalism is true, then many of Parfit's claims are indeed wrong and his perspective is indeed askew. Does it follow that his efforts (and consequently much of his life) have been wasted? I do not think so. Almost all those who have engaged in any form of inquiry have been wrong and misguided. That is our predicament: fallible investigators start from the conclusions of their fallible predecessors. Yet even the dedicated mathematical astronomers of the late Middle Ages who explored the complicated details of the equant point in Ptolemaic theory contributed to the advancement of the science, by supplying standards by which more promising post-Copernican systems might be judged, and by introducing possibilities and options into future debates. *On What Matters* belongs with such achievements. It stands as a grand and dedicated attempt to elaborate a fundamentally misguided perspective. Its diligence and its honesty command respect. Perhaps these real virtues will set standards for very different ventures in academic ethics, Naturalist or otherwise—for a return to the tradition of attempts to understand and improve everyday judgment, and to provide resources for people and policymakers everywhere. In the end, that is what matters.

Philip Kitcher is John Dewey Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University and the author, most recently, of The Ethical Project

(Harvard University Press). This article appeared in the February 2, 2012, issue of the magazine.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501) (c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.