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Booknotes: On What Matters

It is a matter of considerable sadness that Derek Parfit died in January 2017. His loss to philosophy is huge, and, to judge by the spate of publications by and about him, he was at the height of his powers and his influence. Indeed, by a coincidence, happy or unhappy, depending on how one looks at it, his death coincided with the appearance of two massive volumes, both handsomely produced by Oxford University Press. One of these volumes, entitled *Does Anything Really Matter?* and edited by Peter Singer, consists of reactions to his recent work from fourteen philosophers, many of whom are without question leading figures in the field. The second volume has been issued as Volume Three of Parfit's own late master-work *On What Matters*, and consists of more than four hundred pages of responses to *Does Anything Really Matter?,* pages which include some development by Alan Gibbard and Peter Railton of their earlier criticisms of Parfit in *Does Anything Really Matter?*. The upshot of these exchanges is all that all three declare themselves closer philosophically than they at first thought.

Parfit finds this outcome 'immensely heartening', understandably so, because what emerges above all from these two volumes is anxiety when he finds philosophers he admires differing from him. He is concerned with getting things right, and *On What Matters, Vol III* is an amazing testament to this concern. At times there is line by line unpicking by Parfit of the words and sentences of his critics; what we have is a master class in philosophical argument: how by immensely detailed reading and making of distinctions, what is really at issue between philosophers can be elucidated and even, as we have seen, resolved. Philosophical progress, indeed; what, though, are these 700 plus pages really about?

What they are about is whether we would be right to think of ethical statements as being in a strong sense, true or false, objective if you like, as opposed to subjective, and whether there are external reasons for holding moral truths, as opposed to the internal reasons which actually motivate us, and motivate us differentially – though as anyone who reads any part of either book will quickly realise, this is far too simplistic a way of putting things. The books, in other words, amount to a gigantic exercise in meta-ethics, and in Parfit's view this really matters. If there are not ethical truths, apart from our subjective responses and our evolutionarily determined reactions, then there would be a sense in

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which nothing (really) matters – apart that is, from there being disparate things individuals might from time to time care about.

So, in Parfit's view, some things do matter, really matter; and underlying this objective mattering are irreducibly normative, non-natural facts. We discover these facts through intuition and reason. We intuit certain things as really objectively important and then reason about them, either endorsing our original intuitions, or perhaps modifying (or even rejecting) them, or developing and extending them. Parfit also holds what he calls a convergence thesis, that under certain ideal conditions of argumentation 'we would nearly all have similar normative beliefs'. In developing his position further he aspires to synthesise a form of Kantianism (impartial reasoning), a species of utilitarianism (suffering is bad, period), and a sophisticated rule consequentialism (what matters is not so much the inner dispositions of agents as whether their actions follow rules which overall produce the best outcomes).

It would probably be fair to say that for Parfit the badness of suffering is absolutely fundamental, as is the convergence thesis. Taken together these two propositions will bring him into conflict with Nietzsche, for whom suffering is not always bad, absolutely speaking. Suffering can play not just an instrumental role in making us happier or better after the suffering. It can also be constitutive of our deepening as a person, in such a way that without that particular form of suffering, under the 'tyranny of timidity', our personalities would remain 'small, soft, round, unending sand'. Parfit could, of course, declare at this point that his morality is not concerned with character in this way; well, maybe not, but these considerations put a strain on the convergence thesis. And not just Nietzsche. In Dante's *Purgatorio* the souls being redeemed long to suffer the pain of purification, for the pain *is* the purification from the dross of vice. Like Arnault Daniel, they rush to throw themselves into the purifying fire, 'poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina'.

Leaving aside precise points abut suffering and convergence, there is a further question which hovers over Parfit's whole enterprise. Let us grant that he does establish convergence in reasoning about morality, that morality is based in the kind of objectively intuited properties and reasons he is aiming to elaborate, and even that we can admit that some things are 'reasons for everyone, regardless of their motivational structures', as Simon Blackburn puts it in *Does Anything Really Matter?*. This might, as Blackburn writes, be fine as a piece of 'edifying moralising', but it leaves out the key point about the connection between moral reasoning and action. Desire must play a role, here, and maybe, as Aristotle observed, even

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reasoning (well) about morality presupposes a good character in the reasoner, a schooling in habits of virtue to engage and direct not just the will but reason, practical reason, as well.

We are not suggesting that Parfit was unaware of any of these points – indeed most of them are, in one way or another, raised in the two books before us. But, and this is not so much a criticism as a testament to the fruitfulness of Parfit's thinking, it might be felt that more needs to be said on all of them. Where more certainly needs to be said is on Parfit's two page conclusion to *On What Matters Vol III*. For after 435 pages of dense and careful (though never unclear or unreadable) reasoning about meta-ethics, he suddenly launched into a page and a quarter of practical ethics, edifying moralising with a vengeance.

If we (rich people) think that we are not acting wrongly in lavishing on an evening's entertainment resources which could save a poor person from death, blindness, or chronic and severe pain, we are like those who believed that they were justified in keeping slaves. And while the poorest people in the world may have no legal claim on us, they have a much stronger moral claim. We ought to transfer at least ten per cent of what we inherit or earn to them.

There are clearly hosts of unargued and contentious assumptions in all of this, and we must hope that in the fourth volume of *On What Matters* (on which Parfit was reportedly working at the time of his death), some of these are argued as carefully and convincingly as is the meta-ethics of the first three volumes. In advance of further elaboration, though, it is difficult not to ask why, if Parfit really believed what he said, just 10%? St Martin of Tours gave half his cloak to the beggar and reformed his life, while Francis of Assisi gave up everything and formed an order committed to absolute poverty to care for the poor. At a time when a study from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has argued that 19,000,000 people in Britain (and 45% of children, they say) are living below what they call the Minimum Income Standard, is there just a hint of virtue signalling in academics from wealthy institutions giving up just 10% of their income, and telling their fellow countrymen ('we', who include the 19,000,000) that they all have to do the same?

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