

what matters about metaethics?

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I why parfit's life has not been wasted

According to Part VI of Derek Parfit's *On What Matters*, some things matter.¹ Indeed, there are normative *truths* to the effect that some things matter, and it matters that there are such truths. Moreover, according to Parfit, these normative truths are cognitive and irreducible. And in addition to mattering that there are normative truths about what matters, Parfit holds that it also matters that these truths are cognitive and irreducible. Indeed this matters so much that Parfit tells us that if there were normative truths, but that these truths were non-cognitive or reducible, then he, Sidgwick, and Ross "would have wasted much of our lives" [OWM2 367].

That it would be a consequence of the thesis either of noncognitivism or of reductive realism that Parfit would have wasted his life is, of course, no evidence against either thesis; it is perfectly possible even for the most brilliant thinkers to waste their lives. Indeed, as any of the students from my introductory ethics course would be quick to point out, it is very difficult to think clearly and objectively about a question in which you take yourself have a large personal stake. My undergraduates readily agree that the steak they have is enough to complicate their thinking about moral vegetarianism; so certainly explosive expressions like 'wasted my life' give Parfit the kind of loaded stake in metaethical questions that should make us cautious of trusting his intuitive verdicts in metaethics. Fortunately, as I will argue in this paper, Parfit has not wasted his life, and he would not have wasted his life, even if it turned out that either noncognitivism or reductive realism turned out to be true.

In arguing that Parfit has not wasted his life, independently of the answer to any metaethical question, I am, of course, arguing against Parfit's own conception of what makes his life worthwhile. Parfit clearly believes that the worthwhileness of [much of]² his life turns on the answer to questions in metaethics. But even brilliant thinkers can be wrong, and they are more likely to be wrong both about

¹ Subsequent references to *On What Matters* will be given in-line, with reference to the appropriate volume.

² I'll be ignoring this qualification from here forward for illustrative purposes.

topics that are relevantly distinct from the topics to which they've applied their greatest brilliance, and when their approach to these topics is colored by a deep sense of a personal stake in them. Still, I admit that it is a bold thesis to claim that someone else's conception of what makes their own life worthwhile is incorrect.

But fortunately, it is no more bold – indeed, it is less bold – than Parfit's own pronouncements to the effect that other philosophers have not understood or believed their own views. For example, about me, Parfit says, "Schroeder's worries seem to show that he does not really accept his own view," on such paltry evidence as that I acknowledged the intuitive force of apparent counterexamples to that view [OWM2 361]. Whereas Parfit's argumentative strategy in Part VI of *On What Matters* requires showing that everyone who seems to disagree with him either does not have the right concepts to disagree at all, or that they do not really accept their own views (Mackie and Williams apparently fall on the former fork, while I fall on the latter – Nietzsche conveniently slips the forks of the dilemma by going insane), my argumentative strategy only requires establishing that the significant value of Parfit's life has not depended on the answer to central metaethical questions.

Let me begin, therefore, with my master argument that Parfit has not wasted his life. It goes like this:

- 1) *Reasons and Persons* constitutes one of the most important contributions of the last century to making progress in our thinking about substantive normative ethics (*premise*).
- 2) Making progress in our thinking about substantive normative ethics is one of the things that matters most (*premise*).
- 3) Parfit is the author and creator of *Reasons and Persons* (*premise*).
- 4) So Parfit is the author and creator of one of the most important contributions of the last century to one of the things that matters most (from 1, 2, and 3).
- 5) No life which involves creating one of the most important contributions in a century to one of the things that matters most has been wasted (*premise*).
- 6) So Parfit's life has not been wasted (from 4 and 5).

Where could this argument go wrong? It is valid, and has only four premises, one of which is that Parfit is the author of *Reasons and Persons*, which seems difficult to reject. Moreover, the only cause Parfit could have to reject premise 1 would be modesty; indeed the Oxford promotional materials for *On What Matters* describe *Reasons and Persons* as "one of the landmarks of twentieth-century philosophy". Since substantive normative ethics is only one branch of twentieth-century philosophy, and an underappreciated one, at that, it is safe to conclude that any contribution to substantive normative ethics that it also a landmark of twentieth-century philosophy full-stop is one of the greatest contributions to substantive normative ethics.

Premise 5 also looks unassailable; surely if any lives are not wasted, it is lives which make epochal contributions to the things that matter most. And yet premise 2 can hardly be said to be a weakness of the argument, either, for it is hard to see why Parfit himself would have spent so much time preoccupied with the attempt to make progress in substantive normative ethics – both of his books are preoccupied with the possibility of such progress – unless he himself agreed that this matters. So I conclude that the argument is sound. Parfit has not wasted his life.

Of course, Parfit may agree with me that his life has not been wasted, for he believes that there are *irreducible, cognitive* normative truths about what matters, and he maintains only that his life *would* have been wasted, if it turned out that either noncognitivism or reductive realism were true. What is at stake isn't *whether* Parfit's life has value, but *what gives it* value – the fact that he has authored one of the most important contributions to one of the things that matters most, or this somehow coupled with the fact that truths about mattering are cognitive and irreducible. Still, how, then, could things go wrong with my argument, if it turned out that there are normative truths, but those truths are either reducible in some way, or require a noncognitivist interpretation? My argument doesn't say anything about issues metaethical. So where do they come in?

Well, it seems safe to assume that metaethical debates will have no bearing on whether Parfit is indeed the author of *Reasons and Persons*, and so premise 3 looks safe. But there are two possible ways in which one might think that a problem could arise for one of the other premises, on the basis of metaethical views. First, if there can be no such thing as progress in substantive normative ethics, then premise 1 couldn't be true since it says that *Reasons and Persons* was a great contribution to such progress. And second, if nothing at all matters, then it follows that either premise 2 or premise 5 is false. Which is false will depend on whether we interpret the expression 'one of the things that matters most' so that if nothing matters, then everything is among the things that matter most – i.e., not at all. If we so interpret it, then if nothing mattered, premise 2 would be trivially true, but premise 5 would be false, since some lives are indeed wasted. Whereas if we interpret this expression so that it entails that something actually matters, then premise 2 would clearly be false if nothing mattered. Either way, the view that nothing matters would plausibly make trouble for my argument.

Fortunately for Parfit's concern that whether his life would have been wasted turns on matters metaethical, there seem to be metaethical views with each of these consequences. By the lights of the sort of crude emotivism espoused by a number of the logical positivists in the 1930's, for example, which is clearly a metaethical view, there does not seem to be anything worth calling 'progress' in normative ethics. Indeed many of the logical positivists were of the opinion that there was no properly philosophical

discipline of normative metaethical inquiry at all – again, clearly a metaethical view. Similarly, global error theories seem to be committed to the view that nothing really matters, any more than anything is right or wrong, or good or bad. I don't say that if either of these metaethical views turned out to be true, then Parfit's life would indeed have been wasted, because my argument considers only one sufficient condition among, perhaps, very many, for this to be false. But certainly my explanation of why Parfit's life has not been wasted would run into trouble if either of these metaethical theories turned out to be true. So in that respect, metaethics does look like it matters.

However, now we run into yet another problem. For Parfit claims not only that it matters that certain metaethical views are false. He appears to think – indeed, he could have saved hundreds of pages and many hours of his readers' time if he did not – that it matters that *all* metaethical theories other than his own cognitivist non-reductive realism are false. But so far we've only seen that there are certain metaethical views which are committed to rejecting one of the premises of my argument – we've hardly seen that *all but one* metaethical view is committed to rejecting one of the premises of my argument. Yet that seems to be what Parfit must think. How could that be so?

2 conservative reductive realism

For concreteness, and because we know from the text that mine is one of the metaethical views which Parfit believes it matters to refute, let's take the case of the sort of conservative, non-analytic, reductive realism that I've defended in previous work. According to this view, some things matter – indeed, there are normative truths about what matters. But this view hypothesizes that there is an interesting question about *what it is* for something to matter – a question that can be answered in non-normative terms. It is no part of this view that we could do away with normative talk and thought about what matters and replace it with non-normative talk and thought. Similarly, it is no part of this view that substantive normative inquiry into what matters is not an autonomous and important domain of genuine inquiry. It is only a theoretical hypothesis about what it is to matter.

Indeed, it is intended to be a conservative theoretical hypothesis. If any particular hypothesis about what it is to matter turns out to be inconsistent with other particularly indubitable truths, the proponent of this sort of metaethical view sees that as a strong argument against that particular hypothesis. And if every particular hypothesis about what it is to matter turned out to be inconsistent with other particularly indubitable truths, the proponent of this sort of view would cease to advocate it. Nothing about the outlook of this sort of view is intended to undermine or upset ordinary normative ideas; on the contrary,

the whole idea is to hold fixed ordinary normative ideas and try to answer some *further* explanatory questions in a way that is particularly theoretically satisfying.

As I have noted, it is part of the conservative outlook underlying the idea that the reducibility of the normative to the non-normative is a potentially fruitful explanatory hypothesis that no particular reductive hypothesis will count as satisfactory, unless it is consistent with independent truths. That at least some things matter, that there can be progress in substantive normative ethics, and that among the things that matter most is such progress, and that lives that make seminal contributions to what matters most are not wasted, are the right sorts of truths to serve as constraints, on this view. The conservative reductive realist is more confident in these truths than she is in the reducibility of the normative. That is what makes her view conservative. But it does not follow from this that she does not believe in the reducibility of the normative after all, as Parfit claims about me. It simply follows that she believes that there is at least one hypothesis about how the normative could reduce to the non-normative that is compatible with all of the most important such independent truths.

Now it may be that the reductive realist has been over-optimistic, and that she is wrong about this. Indeed, there is much that I am inclined to think that I was over-optimistic about in my own first book. (There is always a danger, for ambitious explanatory theories, of falling victim to optimism.) If so, then it may be that on the best available hypothesis about how the normative could reduce to the non-normative, it follows that certain fairly plausible independent normative truths are false, and hence there would be excellent grounds to reject the reducibility thesis. But it is certainly part of the conservative reductivist's *view* that there is an available reductive hypothesis which will *not* predict the falsity of any important independent truths. So if this sort of conservative reductivism were true, then some things would still matter, among them making progress in substantive normative ethics, and such progress would still be possible, as evidenced by, for example, *Reasons and Persons*. The bar is low for a reductive view to be able to explain why Parfit's life has not been a waste; it needn't be consistent with all of the important independent truths; only with those articulated by premises 1, 2, and 5.

It is worth comparing the conservative reductive realist to the flamboyant reductive realist. Whereas the conservative reductive realist is more confident in a range of important independent truths than she is in the reducibility of the normative to the non-normative, and more confident in the reducibility thesis than in any particular hypothesis about how it works, the flamboyant reductive realist is more confident in his reductive hypothesis than in a range of important apparent truths with which it might come into conflict. The conservative reductive realist's attitude toward normative inquiry is that there are other good theoretical questions that are also worth asking. In contrast, the flamboyant reductive realist's

attitude is that metaethical problems are so pressing that virtually any plausible answer is worth giving up antecedently compelling normative views, if necessary.

The flamboyant reductive realist may or may not hold that my premises 1, 2, and 5 are compatible with his reductive theory. If he does, then even if his view were true, then Parfit's life would still not be a waste. But there is a natural sense in which the compatibility of premises 1, 2, and 5 with his view is not itself a particularly important part of the flamboyant reductivist's view, for he would be happy to reject these premises if it turned out that he was not able to maintain them. Although this doesn't exactly get us the conclusion that were the flamboyant reductivist's view true, my argument would be unsound, it is not exactly comforting, either. It is therefore understandable why Parfit would want to reject the position of the flamboyant realist, because like the conservative realist, his confidence in truths like premises 1, 2, and 5 is high. It is much less clear, however, why it is important whether the conservative reductivist is wrong.

3 the triviality objection

Parfit does offer an argument against any form of reductivism. He appears to be quite taken with the argument, as it recurs repeatedly. The argument is called the 'Triviality Objection', and it is very simple. Parfit begins by defining 'positive' so that if (A) is a generalization of the form, 'When Bx, Dx', where B is a condition spelled out in non-normative terms and D is a normative condition, (A) counts as 'positive' just in case (A) states or implies that when x is B, x also has some other, different, normative property. Similarly, although it plays no direct role in the argument, Parfit defines *substantive* to apply to (A) just in case we might disagree with it, or it might tell us something that we didn't already know [OWM2 343].

With these definitions in hand, Parfit considers an arbitrary reductive thesis, according to which to be D is just to be B. He calls this thesis (C), and calls the corresponding thesis that when Bx, Dx, (A). He then argues:

- (1) (A) is a substantive normative claim, which might state a positive substantive normative fact.
- (2) If, impossibly, (C) were true, (A) could not state such a fact. (A) could not be used to imply that, when some act would [be B], this act would have the different property of being [D], since (C) claims that there is no such property. Though (A) and (C) have different meanings, (A) would be only another way of stating the trivial fact that, when some act would [be B], this act would [be B].

Therefore this form of Naturalism is not true. [OWM2 343-4]

I have to confess that Parfit's Triviality Objection is one of the most puzzling arguments I have ever encountered in philosophy. It is true that according to (C), (A) could not be used to imply that when some act would be B, it would have the different property of being D, because according to (C) B and D are the same property. But that is neither here nor there, because premise (I) does not entail that (A) must be able to imply that when some act would be B, it would have the different property of being D. It only entails that when some act would be B, it would have *some* other, different, normative property. This needn't be the property of being D at all. So the argument is not even valid.

Moreover, the fact that Parfit seems to treat this argument as if it were valid, by assuming that premise (I) really entails that the 'different normative property' which (A) states or implies must be the property of being D, makes the argument look trivially question-begging. I grant that Parfit is very confident that no reductive theory is true, and that gives him great confidence that for any reductive hypothesis (C), the corresponding statement (A) will state or imply that when x is B, it has the *different* property of *being D*. But what is at issue here is precisely what rational grounds there are for this sort of confidence. And it is very hard to see where any rational grounds for confidence in Parfit's premise (I) are supposed to come from, that do not stem directly from confidence that being D is not the same as being B. And so it is very difficult to see how this argument is supposed to give us any leverage in evaluating whether the reductive hypothesis could be true.

Still, since even if the argument is effectively question-begging, it is not even valid, we can grant Parfit's premise (I) without trouble, so long as attributions of 'D' carry implications that attributions of 'B' do not. If any of these implications are normative, then 'When Bx, Dx' would be positive after all, in Parfit's stipulative sense – even if the reductive thesis is true. In fact, this is a direct consequence of a view for which I've argued in a number of places – namely, that claims about reasons carry *pragmatic* implications about the *weight* of those reasons (which is a normative matter).³ There is no reason why claims about what would be part of the explanation of why the object of someone's desire would be promoted by her doing something would carry this same pragmatic implication.

In his helpful elaboration of how the Triviality argument works against my view, Parfit contends that if I wish to accept that the 'When Bx, Dx' claim corresponding to my view is positive by his definition of 'positive',

Schroeder would then face the Lost Property Problem. It is hard to see what this other property could be. And if Schroeder could find some other property that could be the

³ See especially Schroeder [2007], chapter 5.

normative property... he would have to apply his Naturalism to this other property. The Triviality Objection would then apply to this other claim. This objection would not have been answered. [OWM2 359]

This sounds on the face of it like quite an impressive problem – that it should be both difficult to see what the ‘Lost Property’ might be, and that even were I to say what it is, we would simply be off on a regress.

Fortunately, however, as I’ve already noted, it is not difficult to see what other property might be implied by generalizations about reasons, at least according to the views I’ve already defended in print; it is the property of being a relatively *weighty* reason. And I have in fact already applied my reductivism (unlike Parfit I don’t use the term ‘Naturalism’, which I find unhelpful) to this other property; I’ve given a reductive account of the weight of reasons in terms of reasons in chapter 7 of *Slaves of the Passions*. Contrary to Parfit, moreover, this does not start the dialectic about the Triviality Objection all over again with the other property, because on my view, there is only one reduction of a normative property or relation in non-normative terms. The ‘extra property’ that is implied is one that reduces in non-normative terms only *by way of reducing to reasons*. In fact, I’ve argued elsewhere that *all* promising reductive views should adopt this structure.⁴

Consequently, we may safely reject Parfit’s Triviality Objection. It neither provides evidence against conservative reductive realism like that I’ve defended, nor grounds to think that it matters whether such reductivism is true or false.

4 orogeny of the mountain

Up to this point in this paper, I’ve argued that Parfit’s life has not been a waste, admitted that the soundness of my argument depends on the falsity of *some* metaethical views, and maintained that it does not depend on the falsity of all alternatives to Parfit’s own metaethical view, but only on the falsity of certain, particularly flamboyant, metaethical theses. And I’ve shown that Parfit’s central argument against reductive theories, in particular, is highly problematic.

Fortunately, there is no reason to think that the sort of reductive theory that would be incompatible with one of the assumptions of my argument that Parfit’s life has not been wasted is more likely to be true, or would be more likely to be true, if reductive realism were true, than the sort of reductive theory that would be compatible with those assumptions. Moreover, there are excellent reasons – all of the reasons making the key assumptions of my argument so compelling – to think that a reductive

⁴ See Schroeder [2005].

theory that is compatible with those assumptions is much more likely to be true than a reductive theory incompatible with them. In short, among the available reductive theories, some are better than others, being better candidates for the truth. The better reductive theories are the ones that agree about the important claims that my argument assumes or presupposes.

The same distinction, among better and worse theories – a distinction that we can make by appeal to their fit with independently compelling claims – applies to noncognitivist theories. Just as reductive realists can be flamboyant or conservative, likewise for noncognitivists. Whereas Carnap and Schlick made flamboyant claims, most contemporary noncognitivists share a strikingly conservative orientation. Rather than seeking to derive stunning or unintuitive consequences, they aim to preserve all of the important claims – normative and otherwise – that Parfit emphasizes are so important, and to go on to ask a set of further, explanatory, questions. It's possible to be interested in these further explanatory questions because you find it puzzling *whether* there are any normative truths. But it's also possible to simply be curious about *how* there are normative truths, and find noncognitivism a promising approach for providing a particularly satisfying answer.

Like the distinction among reductive realist views, there are excellent grounds – grounds provided by a lot of independently compelling truths – to hold that conservative noncognitivist views are much more likely to be true than flamboyant ones. Holding this does not require holding that conservative noncognitivist views will be able to bear all of the fruits which they promise – like the reductive realist, the conservative noncognitivist may be over-optimistic about the resources of her view. Indeed, at times conservative noncognitivism has largely consisted of optimism.

But even if we are pessimistic about the conservative noncognitivist's aspirations for success in her conservative ambitions, that's not quite the same as it *matter*ing that she fails. We should distinguish *predictions* that conservative noncognitivism will fail from Parfit's apparent *hope* that it will, and similarly for conservative reductivism. It hasn't been my aim in this paper to defend either reductivism or noncognitivism. It has instead been my aim to lower the stakes of the discussion so that we can evaluate these theories in reasonable and objective ways, treating them as what they are – theories. Certainly they may be false. But if they turn out not to be, everything will still be okay, so long as some things really matter and moral progress really is possible.

The fact that some reductive theses are better than others should look familiar, for readers of parts two, three, and five of *On What Matters*. For in parts two and three Parfit argues that some Kantian views are better than others, and in parts three and five he argues that some Contractualist views are better than others. Together with his view that some Consequentialist views are better than others, this leads to the

result that any Kantians, Contractualists, and Consequentialists who share Parfit's confidence in the data that motivate discriminating these better versions of these views from the worse versions, have much to agree about. Rather than arguing against Kantianism or Contractualism *as such*, Parfit argues only against the versions of Kantianism and Contractualism which fall astray of this core set of data. What turns out to be important, for the Parfit of the core chapters of *On What Matters*, is not which of Kantianism, Contractualism, and Consequentialism is true, but the core theses which their best versions share.

Another similar phenomenon arises in one of the most surprising twists of the entire book, on page 467, just a few pages into his discussion of the metaphysical objections to nonreductive normative realism, when Parfit launches into a criticism of *actualism* and defense of *possibilism*. This is not a defense of the view in ethics known as 'possibilism', but of the thesis from the metaphysics of modality that there are possibilities which don't actually exist. Since possibilism is typically seen as a particularly ontologically extravagant thesis, this is hardly the move one expects in a chapter whose ostensible purpose is to persuade us that Parfit's view is metaphysically innocuous. Yet including Appendix J, Parfit spends a full forty pages attempting to defend this view, even going so far (don't be surprised) as to allege that "though Plantinga claims to be an Actualist, that is not really true" [OWM2 739].

One leaves the appendix with the distinct impression that the thesis that Parfit cares about is simply not the thesis over which participants in the debate in the literature on the metaphysics of modality between actualism and possibilism disagree. Rather, what Parfit seems to think is important, and the reason why he seems to think that Plantinga is really a closet possibilist, is merely that there be a way for us to talk about the different options that an agent could take in a choice situation – something that actualists and possibilists might make sense of in different ways.

In much of part six of *On What Matters*, I'm tempted to suspect that something very similar has happened, for metaethical inquiry in general. There is something important that Parfit is concerned about, and there are real views in metaethics that are inconsistent with the results that he needs – views on which, in particular, my argument that Parfit's life has not been wasted is unsound. But I'm inclined to think that the important issue about which Parfit cares is not quite the same as the issues that have been pursued in contemporary metaethical inquiry under the headings of reduction or noncognitivism. Rather, if what Parfit cares about is right, then though many metaethical views are indeed false, there is still a striking range of what I've called *conservative* metaethical theories – views which share a relatively common picture of the data, but offer competing explanations of it. Though all but one of these views are false, which one turns out to be true would not affect whether Parfit's life has been wasted, and will have no consequences for Parfit's arguments in the core chapters of *On What Matters*.

Like the convergence between Kantian, Consequentialist, and Contractualist approaches to normative theory, the conservative approaches to metaethics which I've been discussing here share a common conception of some of the data. But unlike them, I don't believe that they could merely be complementary paths toward the same truth (although contrast Gibbard [2003]). Rather, they are loosely like different orogenies for the same mountain – different theories about where it came from.

If what you are primarily interested in, like Parfit, is how to get to the top of the mountain, then you may not care where the mountain came from. And if most of the people you talk to who do care where it came from are mostly concerned to try to convince you that that since they can't understand where it came from, it must really be a flat plain, or that since they can't understand how you could have gotten so high, you must not be climbing the same peak as anyone else, you are not likely to find orogeny very worthwhile. But it doesn't follow that the mountain has no history. Even fellow climbers can pause, every once in a while, to admire the sweeping vistas, to rest up for the next leg of the journey, and to ponder whether this mountain was formed by subduction, volcanic action, or in some other way. It is true that many contributions to metaethics are like the orogenist telling Parfit that there is no mountain, or that everyone has her own mountain. But at its best and most interesting, metaethical inquiry needn't be like that at all. It has room for many questions which can be pursued with an open mind even by mountaineers who share Parfit's quest for the peak.

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