

Peter Singer, ed. *Does Anything Really Matter? Essays on Parfit on Objectivity*. Oxford University Press 2017. 288 pp. \$45.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199653836).

This book is a collection of thirteen essays on the metaethical views put forward by Derek Parfit in *On What Matters*. The authors in this volume discuss Parfit's views on the objectivity of reasons as well as his particular version of moral realism. This book moves forward some of the most central debates in metaethics, and as such should be essential reading for students and researchers in the field.

Parfit argued that if the metaethical theories of naturalistic realism or antirealist expressivism were true, nothing would really matter. Each of these views, Parfit argues, collapses into a kind of moral nihilism. As several of the authors point out in their essays, Parfit did not expect any kind of convergence of different metaethical views, at least not in the first two volumes of *On What Matters*. This stands in contrast to his contention in that book there is convergence of different ethical theories such as Kantianism and utilitarianism.

Defenders of expressivism and naturalistic realism have been at pains to argue that their approaches to ethics can fit with at least some elements of commonsense morality, and so it is not surprising that the expressivists and naturalistic realists in this volume take issue with Parfit's claim that their views ultimately are kinds of nihilism.

The editor of the volume, Peter Singer, has contributed a helpful preface, spelling out some of Parfit's metaethical views and situating his critiques in the context of 20th and 21st century metaethics. Two doctrines derived from Humean considerations run throughout the book. The first, the Humean view that since only desires can motivate us, reasons must ultimately be accounted for in terms of desires, is rejected by Parfit. The second, the view that one cannot derive ethical truths from natural facts—that one cannot derive, as people say, an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’—is accepted by Parfit, and is used in his rejection of naturalistic moral realism.

There is a dilemma offered by Parfit regarding naturalism and nonnaturalism: either nonnaturalism is true, and there are objective moral facts, or there is nothing that truly matters at all. Peter Railton takes issue with this. On certain naturalistic views, there are no nonnatural moral properties, but there are different kinds of concepts, normative and natural, that pick out one and the same property. Parfit insisted against such views that they really amount either to a view on which there are two different properties, a normative property and a distinct natural property; or to a view on which there are no normative properties at all. So, the only genuine options are nonnaturalistic moral realism or nihilism.

Drawing parallels to concepts like heat and pain, Railton holds that analyses parallel to naturalistic analyses of normative concepts and properties have proven to be successful in other realms. Against Parfit, Railton holds that the claim that concepts like *what we have most reason to do* and *what would maximize happiness* pick out the same property is a significant claim that does not just amount to the mere tautology that what maximizes happiness is what maximizes happiness. He does so through a careful analysis of the controversial assumptions that Parfit used to claim that naturalistic realism was not a genuine alternative. Railton goes on to suggest that, given Parfit's own lack of commitment to nonnatural properties in any substantial metaphysical sense, that the gap between Railton's and Parfit's views might be smaller than it seems.

Allan Gibbard raises related concerns, drawing on a concept/property distinction to respond to some of Parfit's objections to Gibbard's own views. Gibbard also raises further concerns about Parfit's own positive accounts of the nature of normative properties and how we know these properties. Parfit claims normative properties are nonnatural and nonontological, and we know these

properties in a noncausal way. Gibbard claims, reasonably, that he does not know what nonnatural, nonontological properties that are known noncausally are. He calls such properties ‘mysterious’ (72), and contends that his view, unlike Parfit’s, has the advantage of not starting with such properties assumed. Gibbard offers his own familiar explanation of normative matters in terms of plans and disagreement in plans, while acknowledging that these basic notions are ‘not fully explained’ in a fashion similar to how Parfit does not fully explain nonnatural, nonontological properties (62). Gibbard makes a case, however, that beginning from his own starting points is a more fruitful way to give an account of normativity.

Parfit takes the notion of a reason to do or believe something to be a fundamental normative notion. Like Railton, Gibbard emphasizes some points of agreement with Parfit. Gibbard also holds that the notion of a reason to do or believe something is basic, while offering an account of what it is for someone to believe something to be a reason. In this respect, Gibbard and Parfit have more in common than Parfit recognized, at least as far as Gibbard sees it. Each hold that some things matter, but they give different explanations of what it is for something to matter.

That Michael Smith does not, unlike Railton and Gibbard, seek consensus is indicated by his paper title, ‘Parfit’s Mistaken Metaethics.’ While Parfit held that the notion of a reason for belief or action was a fundamental, indefinable notion, Smith sketches possible analyses of these notions in more basic terms, and suggests, drawing on what Parfit says in *On What Matters*, that Parfit’s own account of reasons for action does not really treat reasons as indefinable. Instead, Parfit analyzes reasons for action in terms of our reasons to do what we aim or desire to do. Reasons for what we aim or desire to do, Smith argues, could possibly be analyzed in terms of reasons for a specific kind of belief: the belief that a course of action is desirable. However, according to Smith, even this kind of analysis fails to make sense of the notion of desirability. Smith offers some reasons for thinking his own analysis of reasons for action, cast in terms of what a fully informed and rational observer would desire, is superior to Parfit’s.

Railton and Gibbard emphasize that if their own respective views on metaethics were true, *pace* Parfit, some things would still matter. Sharon Street, in a sharp and incisive essay, also argues that things need not matter in Parfit’s sense in order for something to matter at all. Street claims that Parfit has not sufficiently distinguished the issue of whether there are normative reasons from whether there are ‘robustly’ attitude-independent normative reasons. Antirealists, according to Street, can accept the former without accepting the latter. We can all get a grip on the basic notion of a normative reason, Street holds, without commitment to any sort of robust notion of a reason. What is a robust reason? Robust reasons, as Street characterizes them, are independent of the normative attitudes of the individual and the nonnormative facts; an antirealist like Street only accepts the existence of reasons based on the normative attitudes of the individual and the nonnormative facts. The antirealist kind of reasons, Street holds, are enough to allow the possibility of normative reasons, making it the case that some things do matter. Street also offers careful analysis of the dialectic between Parfit and Bernard Williams, pointing out that Parfit seems to treat the question of the existence of reasons and the existence of external reasons (in Williams’s sense) as one and the same question, even though they are really distinct. Finally, Street defends her own evolutionary critique of moral realism from Parfit’s replies. Richard Yetter Chappell, in his essay, also takes up issues related to Street’s evolutionary debunking arguments, arguing that evolutionary forces behind our moral development need not lead us to moral skepticism.

One of the last sections of *On What Matters* concerned Friedrich Nietzsche. Parfit saw the radical moral views of Nietzsche as a kind of threat. Parfit’s own intuitionism led him to expect that moral thinkers would converge on a specific doctrine, and as Nietzsche’s views are seemingly quite different from those of Parfit and many other moral thinkers, Parfit sought to reduce the differences

between Nietzsche and himself. Andrew Huddleston, in his essay, carefully analyzes Nietzsche to draw out the differences on matters like the value of suffering and the relevance of the supposed equality of persons. Nietzsche's views on suffering and egalitarianism are more radical, Huddleston argues, than Parfit's own exegesis of Nietzsche allows. Huddleston also makes the case that Parfit attributed a basis for moral skepticism to Nietzsche that relies too heavily on Parfit's own view that Nietzsche's skepticism depends on thinking of morality as necessarily dependent on the existence of God. Huddleston persuasively argues that Nietzsche's skepticism does not entirely turn on this point. He also rebuts Parfit's critiques of Nietzsche's metaethics by showing how Nietzsche's own texts do not clearly outline a detailed metaethical position. Huddleston's essay is both an effective critique of Parfit and an excellent piece of historical scholarship.

While many of the authors in this volume think that Parfit's positive metaethical views and his critique of other metaethical positions are off track in one way or another, the field of metaethics is deeply enriched both by Parfit's contributions to ongoing metaethical debates as well as the responses to Parfit contained in this volume.

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