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## CRITICAL NOTICE

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Climbing Which Mountain? A Critical Study of Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (OUP 2011)

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What does ethical sensibility need from moral philosophy? What should it want or expect, if its expectations are realistic? What method(s) and style(s) are appropriate for moral philosophy, and how do these best serve the ends of moral philosophy? What, above all and most basically, is moral philosophy *for*?

These are fundamental questions for professional moral philosophers, and they impose themselves relentlessly on us the moment we step outside the seminar room. Inside the seminar room, playing along under current moral philosophy's normal conditions, it is remarkably easy to lose sight of them. Moral philosophers mostly seem to be in the business of giving answers and expend endless energy and ingenuity on comparing and criticising each other's answers. But to state a point that is no less crashingly obvious in moral philosophy than anywhere else, to know what the right answer is, we need to know the question. As we can also hardly avoid noticing, there may be more than one right question.

Which question we are answering – which mountain we are climbing, to use Parfit's own lead metaphor – not only determines what counts as a good answer but also determines whether or not the familiar “main schools of moral theory” should be taken, as they routinely are, to be competitors. Suppose, for example, that the utilitarian is asking “What is it best for me to do?,” the Kantian “Which if any currently possible and salient actions have I conclusive reason *not* to do?,” the contractarian “How should we justify our actions to each other?,” and the virtue ethicist “How should I live?.” So far forth in this possible scenario, Kantians, utilitarians, contractarians and virtue ethicists are not even on the same mountain – not even trying to answer the same question.

My point is not that this scenario is actual; some moral philosophers may see things this way, others clearly do not. My point is rather that the

1 possibility is real and insufficiently noticed.<sup>1</sup> Its particular interest here is  
2 that it provides a way of running a completely different conciliatory  
3 project between Kantianism, utilitarianism and contractarianism from the  
4 project that (*inter alia*) concerns Parfit in his large, wide-ranging, impor-  
5 tant, splendidly clear, deeply learned, good-humoured and entertaining  
6 book *On What Matters* (OWM).

7 However, just to get this far, we have to make some crucial assump-  
8 tions that it might be worth our while to pause and question. For  
9 instance, we have known since Socrates' time that it is not inevitable to  
10 assume that moral or other philosophy, whatever questions it may *raise*,  
11 has to be in the business of answering them. (Simply answering them, or  
12 mainly answering them, or answering them at all.) Wittgenstein famously  
13 said that "Philosophy is not a body of doctrine, but an activity" (*Tractatus*  
14 4.112), and that "If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would  
15 never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to  
16 them" (*Philosophical Investigations* I, 128). Again, and perhaps less familiarly,  
17 Simone Weil wrote this:

18 The distinctive method of philosophy consists in getting a clear con-  
19 ception of insoluble problems in their insolubility, then in contemplating  
20 those problems without anything else; fixedly, tirelessly, for years, without  
21 the least hope, in a state of waiting.

22 By this criterion, there are few philosophers.

23 Weil's idea that philosophy – perhaps particularly moral philosophy –  
24 might be essentially aporetic is one insufficiently considered idea; Weil's  
25 idea that it might be essentially contemplative is another. It is not hard to  
26 see other possibilities less extreme than these (and so, maybe, more plau-  
27 sible – like Parfit himself (OWM I: xlv), Weil loves extremes). One is the  
28 idea that we cannot hope to answer moral questions well or wisely unless  
29 we have gained some sense of their genuine and sometimes almost  
30 overwhelming difficulty. Another is the idea that how one answers a moral  
31 question may not be the only, or the most, important or interesting part  
32 of the process of moral reflection. Other, perhaps greater, interest and  
33 value may lie in the reflective process itself rather than its outcome, and in  
34 particular, in what one's conduct of that process reveals or creates in one's  
35 character.

36 I think there is something in both these latter ideas. To develop the  
37 second, the idea of moral philosophy as contemplation, consider the  
38 phenomenology of a part of life that must be familiar to anyone in  
39 academia (although of course not only to them): the activity of study.

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41 1. Parfit notices it: "those who use 'wrong' or 'ought' in different senses may *not* be  
42 disagreeing," OWM I: 171.

1           There is a particular kind of calm, attentive, steady and focused col-  
2 lectedness that we achieve when we are studying well. This is the state of  
3 mind in which we understand things most clearly and learn things most  
4 easily; it is the kind of tranquil lucidity in which real understanding,  
5 genuine intellectual progress, most readily comes to us. It seems to be this  
6 mode of being and experience, and in particular, its essential freedom from  
7 selfishness, its other-directedness, that Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch have  
8 in mind when they speak of “attention.” I think some similar mode of  
9 experience, and the natural human appetite for it (an appetite which, to  
10 repeat, is obviously not restricted to academics and students), must be what  
11 Bernard Lonergan means when he talks about “insight.”<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly,  
12 something related is what people get out of the form of “meditation” best  
13 known by that name in our society. Such outwardly directed lucidity is, as  
14 Weil notes, both rare and elusive; just how elusive it can be is perhaps  
15 suggested by Bertrand Russell’s wonderful remark that true philosophy is  
16 something that a really good philosopher does about once in 6 months, a  
17 bad philosopher never.<sup>3</sup> The idea that this attentiveness and reflectiveness  
18 is one of the most valuable states that human beings can ever be in, and  
19 that this inner stillness is the essential precondition of any genuinely  
20 worthwhile action, is central both to the contemplative traditions of the  
21 great religions and also to the thought of Plato and Aristotle. It is also, I  
22 believe, entirely correct.

23           If what moral philosophy had to offer us was (*inter alia*, of course) ways  
24 of reaching, exploring and enhancing this serenely happy mode of being  
25 and experience, that would, to my mind, make moral philosophy an  
26 entirely comprehensible activity. Moral philosophy would then provide us  
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29           2. “Deep within us all, emergent when the noise of other appetites is stilled, there is a  
30 drive to know, to understand, to see why, to discover the reason, to find the cause, to  
31 explain. Just what is wanted, has many names. In what precisely it consists, is a matter of  
32 dispute. But the fact of inquiry is beyond all doubt. It can absorb a man. It can keep him  
33 for hours, day after day, year after year, in the narrow prison of his study or his laboratory.  
34 It can send him on dangerous voyages of exploration. It can withdraw him from other  
35 interests, other pursuits, other pleasures, other achievements. It can fill his waking thoughts,  
36 hide from him the world of ordinary affairs, invade the very fabric of his dreams. It can  
37 demand endless sacrifices that are made without regret though there is only the hope, never  
38 a certain promise, of success. What better symbol could find for this obscure, exigent,  
39 imperious drive than a man, naked, running excitedly crying, ‘I’ve got it?’” [Bernard  
40 Lonergan, *Insight* (New York: Longman’s, 1957), p. 4].

41           3. “[T]he subject-matter that you are supposed to be thinking of is so exceedingly  
42 difficult and elusive that any person who has ever tried to think about it knows you do not  
43 think about it except perhaps once in six months for half a minute. The rest of the time you  
44 think about the symbols, because they are tangible . . . The really good philosopher is the  
45 one who does once in six months manage to think about it. Bad philosophers never do”  
46 [Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, Lecture 1, at p. 185 in R. C. Marsh, ed.,  
47 *Logic and Knowledge* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956); the remark is specifically about  
48 philosophical logic, but perhaps the extension is permissible].

1 with help in attaining something like what, in an earlier publication in this  
2 journal,<sup>4</sup> I called an “ethical outlook”: an overall way of understanding  
3 life, and the meaning of life, that could reasonably be achieved and valued  
4 – by any reflective person, not just by academics or intellectuals – both for  
5 its own sake, and also as a way to help us to engage with the human world  
6 (and the other worlds) around us. Perhaps some philosophers worth  
7 classifying as “moral” do offer or attempt to offer something like this, even  
8 today (I doubt that any first-rank “moral” philosopher of the ancient  
9 world was ever centrally concerned to offer anything else). Perhaps Parfit  
10 himself gives us more unofficial help of this sort, in OWM, than we might  
11 expect. But what dominates the landscape of moral philosophy today is  
12 something rather different, and something much less comprehensible – to  
13 me at least, given my scepticism about the idea that systematic moral  
14 theory could provide us, all on its own, with anything like a credible  
15 ethical outlook. This is the search for a “theory of the right” in isolation  
16 from any of the background in personal reflection and personal commit-  
17 ment that alone could give any such theory real intelligibility. At least at  
18 first sight, this rather impersonal and rootless quest for a theory of the  
19 right is also what dominates a large proportion of the two fat volumes of  
20 OWM. (“At first sight”: in fact Parfit is doing something less like assertion  
21 and more like exploration of possibilities. This needs to be borne in mind  
22 in what follows.)

23 Derek Parfit has a clear and straightforward view of what moral  
24 philosophy is for, and how it should proceed. As his title tells us in effect,  
25 the point of moral philosophy is to determine and define, at least in large  
26 part, “what matters,” and hence, at least in that part, what our reasons are.  
27 It is a central concern of his, especially in Part Six, to argue that we *really*  
28 *do* have such reasons; irrealists are wrong to think that our reasons are in  
29 some way ultimately illusory. His campaign of argument against irrealism  
30 is a *tour de force*. Amid the forests of depressingly oblique, hyper-technical  
31 and often deeply boring discussions that have grown up in meta-ethics,  
32 Parfit has a refreshing ability to cut to the chase. I take the testiness of  
33 most irrealists’ responses, to date, to Parfit’s defence of moral realism to be  
34 a backhanded compliment. But for reasons of space, I would not engage  
35 closely with these arguments here.

36 As for the method of moral philosophy: What Parts Two to Five of  
37 OWM show us by example is that (at any rate) a method of moral  
38 philosophy is to accumulate precise arguments on particular points to look  
39 for convergence between theories. The omega point of such convergence  
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42 4. Timothy Chappell, “Ethics beyond moral theory,” *Philosophical Investigations* 32.3 (July  
43 2009), 206–243.

1 would be to find the single complete and objectively correct theory of  
2 the right, or to get as close as we can to that single theory. I have said  
3 elsewhere why I suspect that such a theory is impossible, is not worth  
4 aiming at even if possible, and would not be much use to us even if  
5 achieved.<sup>5</sup> However, Parfit sees these difficulties too; he denies that he is  
6 trying to go that far and also denies, as noted above, that he is actually  
7 *asserting* the converged view that his arguments lead him to, rather than,  
8 perhaps, just mooted it as a possibility. (And why bother doing that? Mark  
9 Schroeder<sup>6</sup> has suggested what seems to me the right answer: Parfit wants  
10 to show by example that moral progress is possible. If we can show that a  
11 wide range of serious and intelligent moral theorists have reason to see  
12 themselves as tending to converge on something like the triple theory, that  
13 is a reason for optimism about moral progress.)

14 Parfit and I also (he tells me) both agree with some related remarks that  
15 Thomas Baldwin makes about Parfit's "master" (OWM I: xxxiii) Henry  
16 Sidgwick:

17 [S]ince human affairs are not systematic it is a mistake to think that the  
18 ordinary, common-sense morality which regulates and inspires human  
19 affairs needs to be "systematised" (and then "corrected"). Instead, in  
20 developing a critical appraisal of it, the place from which to start is with  
21 the thought that our common-sense moral judgements concerning our  
22 duties, responsibilities, and virtues are embedded in a largely implicit  
23 understanding of our culture and institutions: the family, place of work,  
24 school, shop, hospital, neighbourhood, state, etc. So a critical understand-  
25 ing of these judgements needs to be informed by an explicit under-  
26 standing of those institutions and their place in human life, together with  
27 an awareness of the possibility of organising human affairs in other ways  
28 [Thomas Baldwin, in Philip Stratton-Lake, ed., *Ethical Intuitionism: re-evaluations* (OUP 2002), at p. 111]

30 Parfit's book does not give any focused consideration to such unsystematic  
31 possibilities for moral philosophy as Baldwin here describes, but that is not  
32 because Parfit rejects them. On the contrary, he explicitly leaves the door  
33 open to such possibilities when he writes, for example, that

34 For some moral theory to succeed, it must have plausible implications.  
35 The Triple Theory has many such implications. But after we have  
36 worked out what this theory implies, and we have carefully considered  
37 all of the relevant facts and arguments, this theory might conflict with  
38 our intuitive beliefs about the wrongness of certain acts. If there are  
39 many such conflicts, or these intuitive beliefs are very strong, we could  
40 then justifiably reject this theory (OWM I: 415).

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43 5. See reference in last note.

44 6. In his Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews notice of OWM, August 1 2011, [http://](http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/25393-on-what-matters-volumes-1-and-2/)  
45 [ndpr.nd.edu/news/25393-on-what-matters-volumes-1-and-2/](http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/25393-on-what-matters-volumes-1-and-2/).

1 – where rejecting the triple theory does not necessarily mean rejecting it  
2 in favour of some other theory; it might, as Parfit acknowledges, just mean  
3 rejecting all systematic theories.

4 Despite these points, it is easy for people to read OWM – people do  
5 read it this way; Parfit has corrected me for so reading it myself – as if the  
6 only alternatives it really takes seriously are Parfit's own objective, which  
7 is taken to be a single true systematic theory of the right, on the one  
8 hand, and on the other hand, the threatening chaos of moral nihilism.  
9 Apart from accuracy as Parfit exegesis, such a view will not do because the  
10 opposition “systematic theory or irrealism” does not withstand scrutiny.  
11 Why could not a moral irrealist be a systematiser? Why, indeed, would not  
12 an irrealist have more need of system than a realist, inasmuch as he has  
13 nothing else except something like a criterion of coherence to hold things  
14 together? Think here of the way Simon Blackburn uses such a criterion to  
15 hold together systems of attitudes (see, e.g. *Spreading the Word*; Oxford:  
16 Clarendon, 1984, Chapter 5).<sup>7</sup>

17 With this (mis)reading of Parfit, compare a notorious argument from  
18 *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 7th edition 1907,  
19 p. 406):

20 If, however, this view [hedonism] be rejected, it remains to consider  
21 whether we can frame any other coherent account of Ultimate Good. If  
22 we are not to systematise human activities by taking Universal Happiness  
23 as their common end, on what other principles are we to systematise  
24 them?

25 If we reject hedonism, then we cannot “systematise human activities”; so,  
26 we must not reject hedonism. That we might prefer not to “systematise  
27 human activities” at all is an option that Sidgwick does not even mention  
28 here, although it can hardly have failed to occur to him. “To suppose that,  
29 if [the moral theorists’] formulations are rejected, we are left with nothing  
30 is to take a strange view of what in social and personal life counts as  
31 something” [Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*; (London:  
32 Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 200]. The option does, however, occur to Parfit,  
33 and like me, he criticises Sidgwick for missing it:

34 Though Sidgwick once wrote “I will not stir a finger to compress the  
35 world into a system”, he later did that. Sidgwick writes: “If we are not  
36  
37

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38 7. Think too, to deploy the comparison that most usually haunts meta-ethics, of the ease  
39 with which at least minimally realistic science can accommodate mess and disorder: “What  
40 is scientific method? Is it the experimental method? The question is wrongly posed. Why  
41 should there be *the* method of science? There is not just one way to build a house, or even  
42 to grow tomatoes. We should not expect something as motley as the growth of knowledge  
43 to be strapped to one methodology” [Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening* (Cambridge  
44 UP 1973), p. 152].

1 to systematise human activities by taking Universal Happiness as their  
2 common end, on what other principles are we to systematise them?"  
3 (*Methods of Ethics* 406). He should not have assumed that we *are* to  
4 systematise these activities, and that we should therefore be Hedonists  
5 (OWM I: 453, note on xl).

6 Still, in the forests of commentary that have already appeared, Parts Two to  
7 Five<sup>8</sup> of OWM have been widely understood as concerned with a simple  
8 central thesis: that the project of moral theory can be vindicated because  
9 properly understood the three most important systematic moral theories –  
10 contractualism, Kantianism and consequentialism – converge upon the  
11 single “grand unified” moral theory which Parfit allegedly advocates. In  
12 fact, as I say, he does not advocate it; it would be closer to the truth to say  
13 that he puts the triple theory up for discussion. Parfit himself is aware of,  
14 and exploits, the possibility that I mentioned at the outset, that moral  
15 philosophy might find other things worth doing with questions than  
16 simply and assertorically answering them.

17 Why, incidentally, is it a *triple* theory rather than a *quadruple* theory –  
18 why has virtue ethics dropped out as something to be made part of the  
19 convergence? The answer is that virtue ethics is either systematic or  
20 unsystematic. Unsystematic virtue ethics is not part of Parfit’s discussion  
21 because, while as we have seen he is open to unsystematic possibilities,  
22 they are not his main concern in OWM. As for systematic virtue ethics,  
23 Parfit writes this (OWM I: 375):

24 *Motive Consequentialists* similarly claim that, though the best motives are  
25 the ones whose being had by everyone would make things go best, the  
26 best or right acts are not the acts that would make things go best, but the  
27 acts that would be done by people with the best motives. These theories  
28 overlap with those systematic forms of *virtue ethics* which appeal to the  
29 character-traits and other dispositions that best promote human flourish-  
30 ing or well-being. There could be many other forms of Indirect  
31 Consequentialism.

32 Parfit thinks that systematic virtue ethics requires no separate discussion  
33 because, *taken as a theory of the right*, it is just a version of motive  
34 consequentialism. That seems to me a conclusive reason not to take virtue  
35 ethics as a theory of the right. For the equation strikes me, as I think it  
36 will strike most virtue ethicists, as false. Of course, there are consequen-  
37 tialist virtue ethicists, but for most virtue ethicists – Foot, MacIntyre,  
38 Anscombe, Williams, Hursthouse, Swanton and me – their view is a  
39 root-and-branch rejection of consequentialism, or it is nothing.  
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42 8. Including part 4, which is not by Parfit but by four distinguished commentators –  
43 Susan Wolf, Barbara Herman, Tim Scanlon, Allen Wood. Part Five is Parfit’s responses to  
44 them.



1 One way of motivating this rejection is to point to the consequential-  
2 ist's assumption that all reasons arise from the future.<sup>9</sup> That assumption  
3 seems groundless. There seems no obstacle to reasons equally arising from  
4 the past (think of promise keeping, gratitude, resentment and punishment),  
5 or from the present (think of welcoming a visitor or proposing an  
6 impromptu toast), or arising with no particular time index at all (think of  
7 the sorts of activities that Aristotle calls *praxeis*, e.g. playing music or, once  
8 more, study). One difference between the consequentialist and the virtue  
9 ethicist can be that the latter gives due recognition to this variety.<sup>10</sup> But it  
10 will hardly be the only difference if, as I have argued (and as Parfit tells me  
11 he agrees), virtue ethics is not well understood as a systematic theory of  
12 anything, so a *fortiori* not as a systematic theory of the right.

13 What, anyway, is the main argument for the "triple theory" of the  
14 right? (Note again – "the main argument," not "Parfit's main argument."  
15 Parfit is entertaining this theory, not asserting it.) Jacob Ross summarises  
16 the argument roughly as follows:<sup>11</sup>

17 R1. *The Formula of Universally Willable Principles*: An act is wrong unless  
18 such acts are permitted by some principle whose universal acceptance  
19 everyone could rationally will.

20 R2. There are some principles whose universal acceptance would make  
21 things go best.

22 R3. Everyone could rationally will that everyone accept these principles.

23 R4. At least in most cases, these are the only principles whose universal  
24 acceptance everyone could rationally will.<sup>12</sup>

25 R5. So these are the principles that everyone ought to follow.

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27 9. I develop this argument further in "Intuition, system, and the 'paradox' of deontology,"  
28 in L. Jost and J. Wuerth, ed., *Perfecting Virtue*, Cambridge UP 2010. Notice the difference  
29 between saying that all reasons arise from the future – which, as my main text argues, is false  
30 – and saying that all reasons are future-directed – which must be true, at least in the sense  
31 that by its very structure deliberation is about the question "What *shall* I do?" I speculate  
32 that one of consequentialism's spurious attractions is its elision of "arising from the future"  
33 with "future-directed". (Thanks to Adrian Moore for discussion.)

34 10. Parfit addresses something like this point at OWM I: 373–4: "The word 'consequen-  
35 tialist' is in one way misleading, as is talk of the goodness of *outcomes* and the acts that *make*  
36 things go best . . . the goodness of some outcomes might depend in part on facts about the  
37 past. It might be better, for example, if benefits went to people who had earlier been worse  
38 off . . . And some acts, intentions, and motives may be in themselves good or bad, whatever  
39 their effects . . . When we ask whether it would be best if something happened, or if  
40 someone acted in some way, we are asking what, from an impartial point of view, everyone  
41 would have most reason to want, or to hope." If this means that Parfit himself rejects the  
42 thesis that all reasons arise from the future, then so far forth his own view is not  
43 consequentialist – though it does have other consequentialist characteristics, marked here by  
44 the words "from an impartial point of view" and "most".

45 11. Jacob Ross, "Should Kantians be consequentialists?," pp. 126–135 of the *Ratio* Special  
46 Edition on Derek Parfit's *On What Matters*, edited by John Cottingham and Jussi Suikkanen,  
47 April 2009. Rarely has so much been published about a book that has not yet been published.

48 12. In the light of comments that Parfit has made to me in correspondence, I have altered  
49 what Jacob Ross originally says by adding "at least in most cases" to R4.



1 And these principles are the substance of what Parfit (OWM I, S49) calls  
2 the

3 *Triple Theory*: An act is wrong just when such acts are disallowed by the  
4 principles that are optimistic, uniquely universally willable, and not rea-  
5 sonably rejectable.

6 R2's last three words imply that there is something determinate called  
7 "things going best": there is some one specifiable way the world *in toto* can  
8 be which counts as its best state. But this, it seems to me, is quite untrue.  
9 The point is, of course, a very general one, and it affects all sorts of moral  
10 theories, not just the triple theory (and not even just consequentialist  
11 theories). Still, it may be worth dwelling on a little.<sup>13</sup>

12 There is something bizarre about the very idea of *any* assessment of  
13 how well the world *in toto* is going. When I ask you "How are things?,"  
14 this is not a vernacular ellipsis of "What is your evaluation of the current  
15 overall state of the universe?." As a matter of fact, we do not perform such  
16 evaluations; as a matter of principle, I doubt we know how to, or need to  
17 know how.

18 There is something particularly bizarre about the very idea of an  
19 assessment of some possible state of the world *in toto* as the *best* possible  
20 state of the world *in toto*. What would that mean? I do not know what a  
21 (finite) description of the world in its best possible state would sound like.  
22 I have even less idea why, for any such finite description, it would not  
23 always be possible to add some more details that make it *better*. There is no  
24 largest integer; why should there be a best total state of affairs? (Remem-  
25 ber Gaunilo's island.)<sup>14</sup>

26 A standard response to this point is to retreat from the formulation  
27 "things going best" to the formulation "things going at least as well as in  
28 any other scenario we can imagine." But here again, the last three words  
29 are fatal. What have the limits of our imaginations to do with anything?  
30 (Whose imaginations, anyway?) And, anyway, this formulation fixes  
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33 13. For more about this argument see my "Option Ranges," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 18  
34 (2001), 107–118. See also Eric Wiland, "Monkeys, typewriters, and objective consequen-  
35 tialism," *Ratio* 18 (2005), 352–360, and James Lenman, "Consequentialism and cluelessness,"  
36 *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29 (2000), 342–370.

37 14. Parfit tells me (in correspondence) that his view is that "When we are comparing  
38 several possible outcomes, we don't have to be considering all other imaginable outcomes.  
39 I believe it would have been much better if the First and Second World Wars had been  
40 avoided, or if Aids had not killed millions of people. If you [TC] have some such beliefs,  
41 we don't disagree." I disagree; I think we do disagree. To think that there is something (or  
42 some set of alternative things) that can coherently be called "things going best," even if this  
43 is only a rough characterisation, is to think something much stronger, much more global,  
44 than just having a variety of views about particular cases of comparative value. On pain of  
45 arbitrariness and/ or debilitating vagueness in its foundations, consequentialism needs this  
46 much stronger thought. It cannot have it.

1 nothing; as Parfit agrees (OWM I: 378), there is not just *one* such scenario.  
2 If any such scenario could be described at all convincingly, lots could, and  
3 all of them might well dictate quite different principles. The same is true  
4 if we alter “things going best” to “things going well in the following  
5 specific way. . .”

6 Either alteration introduces an important arbitrariness into the founda-  
7 tions of consequentialism. When we talk about “things going best,” we  
8 are not really, literally, talking about the best conceivable state of affairs  
9 (or even the best conceivable state of affairs given unchangeable facts,  
10 e.g. the laws of nature and previous history of our world).<sup>15</sup> Unless we  
11 go for the third alternative in the last paragraph, we are not even talking,  
12 with any clarity or determinacy, about any particular way the world  
13 could be. We are talking vaguely and impressionistically about things  
14 going *well*. And insofar as we manage determinacy, we are talking about  
15 one particular way for things to go well, which apparently we have  
16 fastened on pretty much arbitrarily, simply because it strikes us or grabs  
17 our attention.

18 Once it gets in through R2, this arbitrariness infects the argument’s  
19 third and fourth premises. Strictly speaking, R3 and R4 are now inde-  
20 terminate in sense because the reference of “these principles” is no longer  
21 fixed. Even if we can patch up that problem, there are other objections  
22 too. Why would it be true (R3) that everyone could rationally will the set  
23 of principles that would make things go best, or (R4) that if there was any  
24 set of principles thus willable, there would (even in most cases) be just one  
25 such set? Consider this, from Christine Korsgaard:

26 [W]hat makes the sum of [everybody’s happiness] desirable? Mill wants  
27 to mean that each *part* of it is desired, by the person whose happiness it  
28 is. But of course a maximum does not include its parts in *that* way:  
29 maximising happiness is not like adding one acre of ground to another  
30 that adjoins it. Conflicts are possible, and if the calculation turns out so,  
31 I may have to sacrifice my happiness in order to maximise the total, and  
32 then where is my part?

33 Someone who challenges the principle of utility when his own happi-  
34 ness is to be sacrificed is not denying that there will be more total  
35 happiness if we follow the principle of utility. He is asking why he  
36 therefore has a reason to give up his own happiness, which the utilitarian  
37 must agree is also a good. The utilitarian can try to block this challenge  
38 by insisting that a maximum of happiness is obviously better . . . But the  
39 utilitarian cannot base this claim on the idea that a maximum of  
40 happiness includes any person’s happiness and more, because it doesn’t;  
41 someone’s happiness may be left out. [C. M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*  
42 (Oxford UP, 2009), pp. 54, 56–57].  
43  
44

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45 15. Thanks here to Sarah Broadie.

1 The idea that horrendous sacrifices might be demanded of individuals to  
2 secure the overall good – torturing one person to save a million, etc. – is  
3 familiar enough from critiques of consequentialism. There is no reason a  
4 priori to think that “the set of principles that will make things go best”  
5 will not involve such sacrifices. If it does, then there is no reason, either,  
6 to think that these sacrifices will be ones that the individuals involved can  
7 rationally will.

8 To deal with this problem, and to make it come out that there *is* a set  
9 of principles that everybody can rationally will that everybody should  
10 accept, the triple theory needs to set a level of sacrifice to the agent that  
11 is consistent with that agent’s accepting that sacrifice without irrationality.  
12 But then, two consequences follow.

13 First, it becomes clear that “rational willing” in Parfit’s sense is conse-  
14 quentialist willing, the trading-off of costs against benefits. This is neither  
15 what Kant had in mind nor, so far as I can see, close enough to Kant to  
16 count even as a feasible revisionism about Kant. Parfit is quite open about  
17 his revisionary reading of Kant (OWM I: 17): “It may be objected that, if  
18 we revise Kant’s formulas . . . we are no longer discussing Kant’s view.  
19 That is true, but no objection. We are developing a Kantian moral theory,  
20 in a way that may make progress.” But is the theory even Kantian?

21 In the second consequence, *prima facie*, it seems entirely possible that  
22 following the set of principles that we derive by Parfit’s methods will look  
23 so far suboptimal to a more orthodox consequentialist that he will prefer  
24 to follow some policy with higher payoffs, *even though* this policy is not  
25 one that everybody can rationally will that everybody should accept. <sup>4</sup>  
26 Maybe there is some policy that gives us four times as much utility, but  
27 which only 90% of people can rationally will that everybody should  
28 accept, or that everybody can rationally will that only 90% of people  
29 should accept . . . and so on; complexities reminiscent of Michael Ridge’s  
30 variable-rate rule utilitarianism.<sup>16</sup> As Parfit himself agrees, anyone conse-  
31 quentialistically inclined might well follow one of these policies rather  
32 than the policy that the triple theory proposes.

33 In the remainder of this critical study, I turn from Parfit’s discussion of  
34 the triple theory to his method and style, and to a key philosophical issue  
35 that they raise. Consider this (OWM I: 256):

36 Suppose again that, in  
37

38  
39 *Rescue*, a hundred miners are trapped underground, with flood-waters  
40 rising. These miners will all be saved if four people join some rescue  
41

42  
43 16. Michael Ridge, “Introducing variable-rate rule utilitarianism,” *Philosophical Quarterly*  
44 (2006) 56 (223): 242–253.

1 mission. I know that four other people have already joined this mission.  
2 I could either join this mission as well, or go elsewhere and save the life  
3 of some other single person.

4  
5 On the whole scheme view, I ought to join this mission, since my act will  
6 then be one of a set of acts that will together do the most good, by saving  
7 a hundred people. This is clearly the wrong conclusion. I ought to save the  
8 single person, since one more person's life would then be saved. [5]

9 The argument that Parfit presents here against what he labels "the  
10 whole scheme view" is intended to be decisive. But it can only be decisive  
11 if we share a whole collection of unspoken but non-trivial assumptions  
12 with Parfit, assumptions that serve to close off all practically significant  
13 redescriptions of the situation.

14 For example, Parfit must mean us to assume that I do not know (as in  
15 practice I obviously might) that one or more of the four already involved  
16 in the miners' rescue is a deeply unreliable person, or someone who is  
17 liable to faint, drop dead or sink into a drug-crazed stupor before she/he  
18 has done what needs to be done.

19 Again, Parfit must be assuming that the "other single person" whom "I"  
20 can save in *Rescue* is in some way or other already salient to me. It is not  
21 that my alternatives are (i) to join the mission to rescue the miners and (ii)  
22 to commit myself, instead, to the bizarre project of simply looking for  
23 someone – anyone, anywhere – to rescue. [How could (i) be a serious  
24 alternative, for anyone remotely sane?] The alternative to (ii) that Parfit has  
25 in mind is rather something like (iii) "rescue such-and-such particular  
26 individual already known to me, and already in need of rescue." [6]

27 Third, it matters to Parfit's argument that (i) and (iii) *are* my alterna-  
28 tives. (My salient alternatives? My only alternatives?) If I had other options  
29 besides (i) and (iii) that we needed to consider, then his argument might  
30 well not be conclusive – which is the Latin for "closed off" – in quite the  
31 way that he wants it to be.

32 Fourth, Parfit must also be closing off as illegitimate the possible  
33 response to *Rescue* that is summed up by the words "One of these miners  
34 is my wife; no matter what else may be going on, I am going to make  
35 *absolutely certain* that she is rescued, that she will know that that is what I  
36 did, and that I will be there waiting for her when she gets out of the  
37 mine." (Where it was applicable, how *could* this response be illegitimate?)

38 And so on and so forth, without any obvious stopping point. This [7]  
39 indefinitely extensive background of shared assumptions is essential to  
40 Parfit's argument; but it is not morally insignificant. Its contents are not  
41 trivial or irrelevant propositions, like the assumptions that, throughout  
42 the time-period in question, "If p, then p," and the law of gravity will  
43 continue to apply.

1 Deliberations about what to do in cases like *Rescue* that are not closed  
2 off in this way, which do *not* take for granted non-trivial background  
3 assumptions but actively question them, are almost entirely heterodox in  
4 contemporary moral philosophy. Yet it is quite possible to imagine non-  
5 closed-off – let us call them *open* – deliberations. Indeed, open delibera-  
6 tions are, at least normally, a good deal more natural to us than closed  
7 deliberations:<sup>17</sup> as Dickens reminds us, in *Hard Times*, through the confes-  
8 sions of the fairground ragamuffin Sissy Jupe.

9  
10 Mr. M'Choakumchild . . . said, This schoolroom is an immense town,  
11 and in it there are a million of inhabitants, and only five-and-twenty are  
12 starved to death in the streets, in the course of a year. What is your  
13 remark on that proportion? And my remark was – for I couldn't think  
14 of a better one – that I thought it must be just as hard upon those who  
15 were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million.  
16 And that was wrong, too . . . Then Mr. M'Choakumchild said, I find  
17 . . . that in a given time a hundred thousand persons went to sea on long  
18 voyages, and only five hundred of them were drowned or burnt to  
19 death. What is the percentage? And I said, Miss; here Sissy fairly sobbed  
20 as confessing with extreme contrition to her greatest error; "I said it was  
21 nothing." – "Nothing, Sissy?" – "Nothing, Miss – to the relations and  
22 friends of the people who were killed" (Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*,  
23 Chapter 9).

24  
25 What M'Choakumchild finds in the child Sissy Jupe – and labours,  
26 indeed, to choke – is a natural propensity for open rather than closed  
27 deliberation. In analytic moral philosophy classes all over the world right  
28 now, that same propensity is being carefully drilled out of students by their  
29 tutors' expositions of trolley problems, cave problems, transplant problems,  
30 rescue problems and the rest of the usual applied-ethics diet of hard-case  
31 thought experiments. Few philosophers are explicit or self-conscious  
32 about this, but Peter Unger is:

33  
34 Toward having the puzzle be instructive, I'll make two stipulations for  
35 understanding the examples. The first is this: Beyond what's explicitly  
36 stated in each case's presentation, or what's clearly implied by it, there  
37 aren't ever any bad consequences of your conduct for anyone and,  
38 what's more, there's nothing else that's morally objectionable about it. In  
39 effect, this means we're to understand a proposed scenario so that it is as  
40 boring as possible. Easily applied by all, in short the stipulation is: Be

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43 17. In a sense, such "deliberation" about hypothetical cases is not strictly speaking *delibera-*  
44 *tion* at all, since it does not lead to real actions. But what it does do is habituate us into ways  
45 of approaching cases of real action; in general, I would say, for the worse. (Thanks again to  
46 Sarah Broadie.)

1 boring! [Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (Oxford UP 1996, pp.  
2 25–26)].<sup>18</sup>

3 Is this a *good* thing that we who teach philosophy are doing to our  
4 students? There seems to be a danger that what we are offering them is a  
5 training in the failure of their imaginations and of their natural human  
6 sympathies. The typical philosophical use of the “thought experiment” in  
7 ethics is not just not to take students of ethics in the same direction as  
8 they go in when they read fictional narratives, towards wide-ranging,  
9 lateral-thinking, unpredictable, creative explorations of the indefinite  
10 possibilities of human life and action. It is to take them in exactly the  
11 opposite direction: to channel them down an ever-narrowing modal  
12 funnel within which all possible readings of a schematically described  
13 situation except for one or two are remorselessly eliminated. This is indeed  
14 a training to which the injunction “Be boring!” is apposite. And the  
15 normal penalty for failing to be boring in the required way is the same for  
16 our students as it was for Sissy: it is a fail.

17 The question of style in moral philosophy will not go away. In other  
18 places besides the one just alluded to, the issue of thought experiments  
19 that has so often been raised in specific connection with Parfit’s work, it  
20 will prove itself – as Bernard Williams often predicted<sup>19</sup> – a deep question.  
21 “To discover the right style [in moral philosophy] is to discover what you  
22 are really trying to do”; “the aim is to sharpen perception, to make one  
23 more acutely and honestly aware of what one is saying, thinking and  
24 feeling.”<sup>20</sup> To assume, as it seems analytic philosophers now standardly  
25 assume (whether reflectively or unreflectively), that there is no more an  
26 issue about style for philosophy than there is for physics, is to presuppose  
27 an answer – a brief and dismissive one – to that question. Insofar as  
28 philosophy, especially moral philosophy,<sup>21</sup> is neither physics nor anything  
29 like it, I am sure that that presupposed answer must mislead us.

30

31 18. Unger’s other stipulation about his cases is also a be-boring stipulation: it is to hold  
32 motives constant (26). “As much as can make sense, the agent’s motivation in one contrast  
33 case, and its relation to her conduct there, is like that in the other.”

34 19. “The problem of how to find a style in moral philosophy is actually one of the deepest  
35 questions about it. For how do you make it realistic without trying to turn into an amateur  
36 novelist, or, again, an armchair anthropologist? Or, if you stick to your last and don’t try and  
37 do those possibly phoney things, how do you stop relapsing into the meticulous boredom  
38 which has surrounded the subject?” (Bernard Williams in an interview with Bryan Magee,  
39 *The Listener* 4.2.71, pp. 136–140, at p. 140)

40 20. This “quotation” is a *mélange* of two passages from Bernard Williams’ *Morality: an*  
41 *introduction to ethics* (Cambridge UP 1972) – respectively from p. 11 in the original edition  
42 (in the original Preface), and from p. xv of the new Preface that Williams wrote for the  
43 Canto reprint of *Morality* (Cambridge UP 1993).

44 21. It is of course true that different relations to physics, and to science more generally,  
45 apply in different parts of philosophy. I have no intention of denying that, but my focus here  
46 is ethical.

1 It must be obvious by now that Parfit can have few readers who are less  
2 ideologically sympathetic than I am to his project and his method in  
3 OWM. (Or at least to the parts of his project I have discussed here. On  
4 some other matters, such as opposition to moral irrealism and to desire-  
5 based accounts of practical reason, which Parfit tells me are at least as  
6 much his main purpose in OWM as the development of the triple theory,  
7 he and I are very much on the same side. Perhaps I have displayed another  
8 pattern of regrettably typical academic behaviour by focusing on my  
9 disagreements with Parfit.) Given our ideological differences, it is a mark  
10 of the excellence of his book how much even I can get from reading it.  
11 In his initial introduction of Kant's philosophy, on p. xlv of volume I,  
12 Parfit delightfully suggests that the Oxford mark for Kant's work might be  
13 an Alpha/ Gamma. If as I suspect something similar is true of Parfit's other  
14 master's greatest work, Sidgwick's *Methods of Ethics*, and indeed of this  
15 book too, then Parfit finds himself in good and enduringly valuable  
16 philosophical company; perhaps the best kind of philosophical company  
17 there is.<sup>22</sup>

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22. For valuable discussions of Parfit's book over several years, and/or of this critical notice, I am grateful to Sarah Broadie, John Cottingham, Roger Crisp, Garrett Cullity, Hallvard Fosseim, John Haldane, Edward Harcourt, Brad Hooker, Gerald Lang, Adrian Moore, Tim Mulgan, Alan Thomas, and above all to Derek Parfit himself, who sent me more than one enormous preprint of the book, responded patiently and in detail to a long series of objections to its argument from me that he can hardly have had much sympathy with, and even found time to send me – almost by return email – 11 pages of comments on an earlier draft of this critical study.



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