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***On What Matters: Volume Three*, by Derek Parfit, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, xiv + 468 pp. ISBN 9780198778608. £25,00.**

In the third volume of the monumental work *On What Matters* (all page references are to the third volume, unless otherwise noted), Parfit reveals the results of his attempts to accommodate criticisms by Simon Blackburn, Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, Peter Railton and others. The names are not redundant in this description of the purpose of the book. For, in a certain sense, the persons themselves are more important to Parfit than their arguments. Parfit's main aim seems to be to show that there is a lot of overlap between his views and theirs and this influences his discussion of the merits and flaws of their arguments. For example, in the case of some arguments, his way of grappling with them consists in pointing out that their premises include claims that are in tension with other views the critics accept, even if the arguments do not really presuppose those further views.

Some might think that the *ad hominem* strategy Parfit is thus pursuing is more fitting for a lawyer than a philosopher. However, what underlies it is the crucial epistemic role he assigns to disagreement. He writes: "I am deeply worried by disagreements with people who seem as likely as I am to be getting things right" (p. xv, see also p. 290), and suggests that such disagreement commands if not abandonment then at least a reduction of confidence. That is why the project of showing that he, Gibbard, Railton, Darwall and others he respects are "climbing the same mountain" is such an urgent task for Parfit.

Parfit sides here with the position that has come to be known as "conciliationism" in the recent debate about peer disagreement. According to conciliationism, roughly, when we find that a view we hold is opposed by someone who is not inferior to us in any respect relevant to

figuring out the truth of disputed issue, reduced confidence is indeed the appropriate response. Parfit's conciliationist sympathies are manifested in many passages in the volume and I shall return to them subsequently.

Large parts of the first two volumes of *On What Matters* are spent on discussing and elaborating Parfit's positions about substantively normative issues, such as his views about the relationship (and affinities) between consequentialist and Kantian approaches to ethics. The third volume, however, focuses mostly on the criticism Parfit has received against his meta-ethical views, and it is also on these meta-ethical discussions that I shall concentrate.

Parfit is commonly seen as a champion of the old-school non-naturalist and intuitionist form of moral realism associated with his great source of inspiration Henry Sidgwick. It seems very important to Parfit, at a personal level, to be able to say that there are some positive moral claims that are true in "in the strongest sense", as he puts it, and to think that the facts they represent are not in any way "second-rate" (pp. 16 and 200, see also volume two of *On What Matters*, p. 479). Much of the criticism he discusses in the third volume are related to the metaphysical and epistemological problems that such a position is often taken to be plagued with. Isn't it too extravagant to suppose that the world comprises, besides natural facts and properties, normative ones of the kind Parfit has in mind? Don't such assumptions belong to an obsolete metaphysics that has been thoroughly discredited in modern times? In response to such criticism, Parfit has tried to design his version of non-naturalism so that it avoids the worries.

The result is a theory he gives the name "non-realist cognitivism". It consists mainly of five elements. The first is "conceptual cognitivism", which—Parfit explains—is the thesis that "most people's normative claims [are] intended or believed to state truths" (p. 56). The second element is "substantive cognitivism", which is the view that some normative claims are indeed true (to distinguish it from John Mackie's error theory). The third element of

Parfit's position is the idea that the normative truths he posits are "irreducibly normative", in that they are "reason-implying" and such that they "cannot be explained in naturalistic terms". Parfit gives the following indication of what he means by the latter phrase:

We cannot give some naturalistic description of certain acts, events, or states of affairs, and then say: 'That's *what it is* for some fact to give us a decisive reason', or 'That's *what it is* for some act to be wrong'. (p. 58)

The fourth element is denoted by the perhaps mystifying qualifier "non-realist". What Parfit wants to stress is that he is not suggesting that there are any "ontologically weighty non-natural entities or properties" or that normative claims "are made to be true by the way in which they correctly describe, or correspond to, how things are in some part of reality" (p. 4). This is obviously the aspect of his position that is supposed to allow him to fend off the metaphysical worries associated with non-naturalism. The fifth element, finally, is epistemological. Like Sidgwick, he denies that moral facts are "empirically discoverable" (p. 6) and suggests instead that they are accessible to us in some other way (through "intuition").

After having stated his non-realist cognitivism, Parfit goes on to argue that its main elements are, or should be, acceptable both to "soft naturalists" such as Railton and to expressivists and quasi-realists such as Gibbard (among others). He has also invited Railton and Gibbard to reflect on the argumentation, and the comments they gave in response are included in the book. Parfit takes those comments to confirm that he has been able to secure a considerable amount of overlap. However, although Gibbard and Railton are polite and sympathetic, and although they declare themselves willing to accept some of the sentences Parfit uses to state his position, one might wonder how deep the agreement goes.

For example, Gibbard explains that he doesn't mind agreeing with Parfit that there are normative truths simply because he thinks, like other expressivists before him, that saying "That's true" is a perfectly acceptable way of expressing one's agreement with a moral opinion. He also doesn't mind saying that those truths are irreducible since he denies that their contents can be adequately captured by straightforwardly naturalist claims. Still, as Gibbard quickly moves on to talk about the elements of his expressivist approach that he thinks separate it from Parfit's, one gets the impression that he considers the similarities to be too superficial to deserve being dwelled upon. The problem with Parfit's position, as Gibbard sees it, "is not that that it gets things wrong, but that it doesn't get enough right" (p. 206).

Thus, Gibbard acknowledges that he and Parfit share many views about the features normative concepts have. But he also stresses that his primary aim has been to not only identify those features but to answer the question of why we would have concepts with such features in the first place. The general aspects of the expressivist type of explanation he thus favors are familiar to any student of contemporary meta-ethics. It emphasizes the role our conative attitudes (our desires and emotions, for example) have in our normative thinking and how our deliberations over normative issues in turn are intimately related to activities like planning and decision-making. The underlying idea is that if we succeed in providing a compelling explanation along those lines then we can see why normative concepts are "just as legitimate as naturalistic concepts" (p. 207).

Parfit's reacts to this response by stating that, for him, the explanatory project Gibbard is interested in has not been a priority. What Gibbard has said in that context can therefore not be said to signify any deep disagreement between them. It illustrates only, Parfit thinks, that their meta-ethical projects differ in certain respects (or that "we can't do everything", as he puts it on p. 225), and that in turn does not lessen the importance of the fact that they agree that there are irreducible normative truths.

However, for an outside observer of the exchange, such as me, this reaction might strike one as a bit tone deaf. The fact that each of a couple of inquirers finds a way to use a string of symbols (“There are normative truths”) to express their position does obviously not entail that they agree in any substantial sense. If they have come to accept the sentence on the basis of radically different types of argumentation it is hard to avoid the suspicion that the “agreement” is merely apparent. It would have been helpful, in my view, if Parfit had taken that possibility more seriously and engaged more deeply with the relevant elements of Gibbard’s approach.

Another of Gibbard’s worries concerns Parfit’s assurance that he does not believe that there are normative properties or facts in an “ontologically weighty” sense or that normative claims “are made to be true by the way in which they correctly describe, or correspond to, how things are in some part of reality”. Gibbard finds those phrases (understandably in my view) obscure. Parfit responds by stressing that he also finds those phrases obscure but points out that, as he merely *denies* that his position has any ontologically weighty implications he doesn’t really owe us an explanation of what the phrases mean (p. 4). This response is also disappointing, in my view. After all, since Parfit indicates that he thinks that some claims, such as straightforwardly empirical ones, *are* made true by the way in which they correctly describe how things are in some part of reality (p. 4), he has surely given the difference between those types of truth some thought.

Parfit also tries another way of explaining why his meta-ethical position does not generate any implausible metaphysical implications, namely by likening normative truths with other non-empirical truths that, in his view, “do not raise any difficult ontological questions”, namely mathematical, logical and modal truths (pp. 3-4, 14, 16. 61-2). By making those analogies Parfit follows an old tradition among non-naturalists. He doesn’t, however, add much to it. That is unfortunate, in my view, as the alleged metaphysical innocence of

those truths is of course also controversial. For example, Parfit believes that some mathematical claims are true and also stresses that one can consistently believe so without positing any mysterious objects such as numbers that exist beyond time and space and with which we cannot interact causally. It seems to me that if one has that position then one owes us at least a sketch of a positive account of the commitments mathematical claims involve that underpins the position. Parfit offers no such sketch. Platonists, who believe that mathematical claims do posit entities with the problematic features, presumably do this because they do not think that there is any alternative way of accounting for their truth conditions that makes better sense of them. Just stressing that they might be wrong is not a fruitful way to press forward.

Although Parfit thinks that his position does not raise any difficult ontological questions he does acknowledge that it raises epistemological ones. He distinguishes in this context between two types of objections against his claim that there are irreducible normative truths: those aimed at showing that there could not be such truths and those aimed at showing that we do not or could not have any reason to believe that there are such truths (see, e.g., volume two, p. 487). The epistemological questions he thinks his position raises are supposed to provide objections of the latter kind.

One of those objections appeals to moral disagreement. Given Parfit's conciliationist sympathies it is easy to see how meta-normative disagreement can be a worry. For if Parfit finds that his non-realist cognitivism is rejected by an epistemic peer (i.e., someone who is as likely as him to be getting things right) then conciliationism directly implies that he should reduce his confidence in it. However, he also thinks that disagreement over *normative* issues may have such implications. Indeed, Parfit takes the nature of the existing normative disagreement to be of decisive importance for his position, in that he assumes that its credibility presupposes the truth of the following claim ("the convergence claim"):

If everyone knew all of the relevant non-normative facts, used the same normative concepts, understood and carefully reflected on the relevant arguments, and was not affected by any distorting influence, we and others would have similar normative beliefs (*On What Matters*, volume two, p. 546.)

However, while it is clear why Parfit is worried about meta-ethical opponents that deny the existence of irreducible normative truths, it might be less obvious why he assigns such weight to the convergence claim and to normative disagreement. Why is the justification of a belief in the existence of irreducible normative truths supposed to presuppose that our normative views would converge? Stephen Darwall suggests in a critical notice of the second volume of *On What Matters* that it has something to do with “constraints on the concept of right that underlie Rawls’s publicity principle” (2014, p. 83). However, that suggestion does not, as far as I can see, fit well with what Parfit himself says about the matter. Consider this quote:

If we had strong reasons to believe that, even in ideal conditions, we and others would have deeply conflicting normative beliefs, it would be hard to defend the view that we have the intuitive ability to recognize some normative truths. We would have to believe that, when we disagree with others, it is only we who can recognize such truths. But if many other people, even in ideal conditions, could not recognize such truths, we could not rationally believe that we have this ability. How could we be so special? And if none of us could recognize such normative truths, we could not rationally believe that there are any such truths.” (*On What Matters*, volume two, 546)

The last sentence indicates that Parfit reasons as follows: If our normative views are opposed

by people who are not in less good conditions than us when it comes to determining normative issues then this saps (in accordance with conciliationism) our reasons for thinking them true. But if we have no reason to think that any of them is a truth we also have no reason to think that there are any such truths in the first place. That is why normative disagreement potentially undermines our reasons for accepting Parfit's non-realist cognitivism.

However, although the reasoning just sketched has some plausibility, it also raises questions. The inference from the claim that we do not have any reason to think of any normative claim that it is a truth to the conclusion that we do not have any reason to think that there are any normative truths is not obviously valid. After all, we could fail to have reasons to think of any particular lottery ticket that it will be a winner and still rationally believe that there will be a winner. Moreover, what the reasoning in question at best seems to show is that justified belief in the existence of irreducible normative truths presupposes that there are *some* normative claims that we would agree on in ideal conditions. And that is a much weaker demand than the one the convergence claim suggests. More generally, given the weight Parfit assigns to normative disagreement one might have hoped for a more nuanced and precise treatment than the one that he gives in *On What Matters*. (See Tersman 2006, chapters 3 & 4, for more discussion about how the existence of moral disagreement may provide resources for a compelling epistemological argument against moral realism.)

Having said that, I would also like to commend the stance Parfit takes here and the fact that he acknowledges the worries normative disagreement potentially raises for positions of the type he favors. An alternative strategy is to defiantly deny its relevance and to adopt epistemic principles to the effect that no skeptical conclusions could possibly follow even from disagreement in ideal conditions. However, the instances of that alternative strategy that I have seen often strike me as quite sophisticated and far-fetched and Parfit's approach is, in my opinion, more honest and valiant.

Parfit is similarly generous towards his anti-realist opponents in relation to another prominent challenge, namely the evolutionary debunking one. The point of departure of that challenge is the idea that our normative beliefs have been shaped by evolution. It is assumed, for example, that the forces of natural selection have made us disposed to find actions morally right to the extent that they promote fitness. The idea is that this account commits realists to conceding that our moral beliefs have been caused by processes that are unrelated to their truth and therefore also to the conclusion that, in so far as our moral beliefs correspond to the moral facts, this correspondence is the result of a mere coincidence. That conclusion is in turn supposed to make it hard for realists to argue that the moral facts they posit can be known.

Some respond to this challenge by denying that the causal background of our beliefs has any relevance to their epistemic status. Parfit, by contrast, swallows that element of the challenge, and suggests instead that the impact of the Darwinian forces might be more limited than what the challengers think. This move makes him vulnerable to the possibility of scientific refutation (which is not necessarily a bad thing, of course), but it also provides him, I think, with the task of offering at least a sketch of an alternative account of how normative beliefs are formed. Moreover, in so far as this alternative explanation is supposed to be a response to the challenge it cannot just be *any* account. It must be an account that vindicates the reliability of those beliefs, by attributing them to factors that we may justifiably believe *are* appropriately related to their truth.

Again, however, Parfit chooses a more evasive strategy. He writes:

We should admit that, if we came to have our normative beliefs because these beliefs were reproductively advantageous, these beliefs would have been caused in ways that were unrelated to their truth. But we cannot defensibly assume that *all* possible causes of our normative beliefs would have been unrelated to their truth. We do not yet know

enough about these other possible causes to be justified in making any such assumption.

(p. 286)

That is true, of course. But the dialectical significance of this point would have been greater, it seems to me, if it had been accompanied with some at least somewhat worked out ideas about which alternative causes (whose influence would supposedly have been more benign relative to the reliability of our normative beliefs) that Parfit has in mind.

I have in this review pointed to what I think are lacunas in Parfit's argumentation; i.e., issues that have not, in my view, been given sufficient attention in the third volume of *On What Matters*. However, there are also lots of relevant issues that *are* addressed extensively and what Parfit writes in those contexts is often both highly interesting and enlightening. Nonetheless, the fact that his defense of his meta-ethical position includes crucial gaps strengthens my impression that, while Parfit undoubtedly deserves being seen as one of the most creative, influential and exciting thinkers in moral philosophy in the last century, this is not mainly due to his meta-ethics.

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