

Forthcoming in *Journal of Moral Philosophy*

D. Parfit, *On What Matters: Volume Three*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 468 pages. ISBN 9780198778608. Hardback: £29.49.

Philosophers are fond of alpine analogies. Bertrand Russell likened philosophical progress to the ‘gradually increasing clarity of outline of a mountain approached through mist’. And R.M. Hare dreamt himself atop a mountain in the mist having found ‘a way of answering moral questions rationally’. Surrounding him, he continued, were the graves of others whom time had shown their belief in reaching the mountain’s summit mistaken.

In Volume One and Two of *On What Matters*, Derek Parfit suggested normative ethicists may be ‘climbing the same mountain’ albeit ‘from different sides’. The most plausible versions of Rule Consequentialism, Contractualism, and Kantianism, he argued, can be combined and disagreements between them resolved. Part Six, the last of Volume Two, however, saw a dramatic shift from conciliation to open hostility.

For the meta-ethical mountain is one Parfit thought many are failing to climb. Some, he believed, are not even at its foothills – suggesting some influential meta-ethicists were not talking about the same subject as him. Arguing by elimination, Parfit defended a form of normative non-naturalism he first called Non-Metaphysical Cognitivism and later renamed Non-Realist Cognitivism.

Volume Two served as a call to arms for meta-ethicists across logical space to halt Parfit’s relentless assault. And answer they did, notably in Peter Singer’s edited collection *Does Anything Really Matter?* Such disagreement troubled Parfit. For he was a conciliationist about peer disagreement; when someone equally competent with respect to ascertaining the truth of some matter disagrees, then lowering our confidence in our own view, Parfit thought, was required.

Volume Three comprises four Parts. Each is deep, rich, and insightful. Responding to Singer’s collection is the primary aim of the first three. The Parfit of Part Seven and Eight, however, is far more accommodating than that of Part Six. Larry Temkin, Parfit reports, convinced him that he should have searched for agreement between his meta-ethics and others, and asked how ‘the insights of the opposing positions might usefully support or illuminate each other’ (p. 54). Parfit subsequently suggests Peter Railton’s Naturalism, Allan Gibbard’s Quasi-Realist Expressivism, and his own Non-Realist Cognitivism can be brought into agreement. Part Nine sees Parfit return to hostilities against Simon Blackburn’s Expressivism, Michael Smith’s Subjectivism, Sharon Street’s meta-ethical Constructivism, Stephen Darwall on internal reasons, and ends discussing Nietzsche’s place on the mountain. Part Ten returns to Parfit’s signature style of ethics as he tries to ‘resolve some of the disagreements between Act Consequentialism and Common Sense Morality’ to render each part of ‘a wider Unified Theory’. Since Parfit carefully reconstructs debates before contributing to them, one can learn much throughout without prior engagement with Volumes One and Two of *On What Matters*.

Insights of opposing positions may, of course, usefully support or illuminate each other. And, undoubtedly, we should search for points of agreement before arguing against one’s interlocutors. But taking Temkin’s advice to commend attempting to resolve all Parfit’s apparent disagreements with others was, I believe, the greatest mistake of Volume Three. For the details of Parfit’s positive theory are sufficiently unclear that comparisons with others are

unilluminating. Such unclarity obfuscates whatever genuine insights Parfit's view may offer. Non-Realist Cognitivism requires further clarification than Parfit provided.

Parfit presents his Non-Realist Cognitivism thus: '*Metaphysical* Non-Naturalists believe that, when we make irreducibly normative claims, these claims imply that there exist some ontologically weighty non-natural entities or properties. Naturalists find such claims mysterious or incredible. Non-Realist Cognitivists deny that normative claims have any such ontological implications. On this view, normative claims are not made to be true by the way in which they correctly describe, or correspond to, how things are in some part of reality.' (p. 60). Is this just a disguised version of other views that accept irreducibly normative claims but deny non-natural aspects to reality?

Parfit continues: '[Take] (A) all true 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. *Metaphysical* Naturalists believe that (B) the natural world is the whole of reality. We cannot, I believe, defensibly combine these claims. If we use the word 'reality' in an ontologically weighty sense, and we accept (B), we ought to reject (A). We ought to believe that some true claims are not made to be true by corresponding to how things are either in the natural world or in some other part of reality. [...] If instead we use the word 'reality' in a wider sense, which implies that all truths are truths about reality, we ought to reject (B). We ought to believe that there are some non-empirical truths that are not about the natural world. These truths [...] do not raise difficult ontological questions. [...] These truths may also raise some difficult *metaphysical* questions, such as questions about possibility and necessity. But these questions are not *ontological*, since they are not about whether certain entities or properties are *real*, or *exist*, in [...] some single, deep, fundamental sense.' (p. 62). Parfit declines to further explain phrases like 'ontologically weighty' and 'some part of reality' since he 'use[s] these phrases when describing views [he] doesn't accept' (p. 60).

But *why* does Parfit think, on an 'ontologically weighty' sense of 'reality' – where 'merely possible objects, acts, or events are not part of reality, nor are abstract entities, such as valid arguments or prime numbers' (p. 61) – that some claims are true without being made true by anything in the natural world or elsewhere? And why does Parfit think that, if we use 'reality' in a wider sense such that all truths are truths about reality, non-empirical truths – 'such as logical, mathematical, and normative truths' (p. 62) – raise no 'difficult ontological questions'?

Most have understandably taken Parfit's discussion of multiple senses of 'exist' in Volume Two (Chapters 31–33 and Appendix J) and Volume Three to hold the key. The first sense: an 'ontological' sense for what exists in the spatio-temporal world or in some non-spatio-temporal world. The second 'non-ontological' sense of 'exist', however, seems to be truthfully ascribed to those entities Parfit denies raise difficult ontological questions: the logical, mathematical, and normative. But as others note, even granting the intelligibility of this sense, why think such entities exist *only* in this sense? Parfit's appeals to logic and mathematics as partners-in-innocence alone do not help – we are asking *why* they suggest normative truths lack ontological commitment. Senses of 'exist' look a dead end.

But perhaps this 'non-ontological' sense of 'exist' is just a way of speaking about what certain claims are partly about, and not an ascription of some way of existing. This would make the 'non-ontological' sense of 'exist' *merely pleonastic*. If so, then no explanation of how Non-Realist Cognitivism avoids ontological commitment to normative properties can be

offered by talk of senses of ‘exist’. Rather, we should turn to some independent explanation for this lack of commitment, which subsequently licences a pleonastic use of ‘exist’ for what true claims that lack ontological commitment are partly about.

The two ways Parfit puts Non-Realist Cognitivism suggest two charitable interpretations. Let Non-Realist Cognitivism be the view that irreducibly normative truths are not made true by anything. We can develop this in a truthmaking framework, positing truthmakers, truthbearers, a truthmaking relation, and a truthmaking-based account of ontological commitment. Some truthmaker-theorists accept truthmaker maximalism, the view that all truths have truthmakers, that is, extant entities that make them true. Others accept truthmaker anti-maximalism, allowing for some truths that lack truthmakers. Candidates include negative existentials, propositions about the past and the future, and necessary truths. One might suggest, then, that (metaphysically) necessary truths lack truthmakers and that (purely) logical, mathematical, *and* normative truths lack truthmakers *because* they are metaphysically necessary. To say that normative properties ‘non-ontologically exist’ becomes a way of saying that they are what some truthmaker-less truths are partly about. I have elsewhere developed Non-Realist Cognitivism this way (Akhlaghi, Farbod. 2022. ‘Non-Realist Cognitivism, Truthmaking, and Ontological Cheating.’ *Ethics* 132 (2): 291–321).

Alternatively, suppose Non-Realist Cognitivism accepts that all truths are truths about reality – where ‘reality’ includes ‘merely possible objects, act, or events [and] abstract objects’ – but denies that normative truths raise difficult ontological questions. Parfit allows that normative properties may face difficult *metaphysical* questions about, say, their necessity and possibility. This offers a second interpretive option: appeal to Meinongianism. That is, to the much-maligned view that there are non-existent objects to which we can refer and which enjoy properties. So formulated, Non-Realist Cognitivism claims that there are irreducibly normative propositions that concern *non-existent* normative properties (just as, say, mathematical truths may be about non-existent abstract objects), to which we can refer and which enjoy certain properties. Such a view avoids any *ontological* commitment to normative properties whilst denying this entails that there *are no* such properties or that they lack various features. ‘Non-ontological existence’ becomes a misleading label for non-existent objects, being part of ‘reality’ in Parfit’s wide sense without having ‘ontological’ existence enjoyed only by, say, entities with causal powers (see Skorupski, John. 2018. ‘On What Matters, Volume Three, by Derek Parfit and Does Anything Really Matter? Essays on Parfit on Objectivity, edited by Peter Singer.’ *Mind* 127 (506): 602–611 for such a reading).

That there are (at least) two radically different readings of Non-Realist Cognitivism is unsurprising. For Parfit sometimes puts claims in non-equivalent ways without always paying heed to the complications this can generate. Whilst never explicitly invoking truthmaker theory or Meinongianism, the above illustrates how charitable attribution of either offers two internally coherent views that avoid charges of objectionable unclarity, whilst reversing the order of explanation between lack of ontological commitment and Parfit’s senses of ‘exist’.

But they also reveal why it was a mistake to try to resolve disagreement between Non-Realist Cognitivism and its rivals before the view was *fully* clarified. Without doing so, comparisons are unilluminating. Neither truthmaker theory nor Meinongianism are invoked by those views Parfit tries to reconcile with his own. Whether reconciliation is possible depends on issues meta-ethics has barely begun to engage with: what theories of ontological commitment do meta-ethicists accept, and which should they? What general meta-metaphysical framework do meta-ethicists employ, and which should they? Lack of engagement with these questions

is another reason why it is hard to evaluate the success of Parfit's reconciliatory project. But, in yet another illustration of the profound fecundity of Parfit's work, he has again pushed us in the direction of asking the right questions.

Regretfully, moral philosophy has entered the post-Parfit era. But if, as Hare also thought, the mountain *can* be ascended, then at its summit we will remember Parfit. For the climb is more collective an endeavour than Hare's alpine dream suggests. We are climbing this mountain together. Parfit's place in that endeavour is irreproachable even if he did not witness its denouement. I have no doubt that Parfit was right that some things matter. I see no better candidate to make that claim true than his life and work. This book is no exception.

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