Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*. Volume 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 592 pages. 978-0199572809 (hbk.). $35/-.

One of the great temptations to which moral philosophers since Sidgwick have succumbed is the search for a theory of everything – a combinatorial view that synthesizes key insights of rival moral theories and explains why their differences are really not as deep as they seem. Although Sidgwick famously hoped to do this for ethics, in the final pages of the first edition of his *Methods of Ethics* he worried aloud that he had searched in vain for a "hypothesis logically necessary to avoid a fundamental contradiction in a vast system of Belief: a contradiction so fundamental that if it cannot be overcome the whole system must fall to the ground and skepticism be triumphant over one chief part of our thought" (*The Methods of Ethics*, First Edition, MacMillan Publishing: London, 1874, p. 472).

Derek Parfit's long-awaited second book, *On What Matters*, is seen by Parfit as the continuation of a project begun by Sidgwick. It is an ambitious and ingenious attempt to show us how the apparently intractable differences between Kantians, consequentialists, and contractualists are, contrary to popular thought, surmountable, and that these theorists are ultimately "climbing the same mountain on different sides." The foundation of this endeavor – the base of the mountain, so to speak – is the theory of reasons that Parfit develops in the first five chapters of *On What Matters*. Because of its central importance, I shall focus on this part of the book, and on his account of *normative* reasons specifically.

What is a reason for action? In recent work Parfit has echoed Joseph Raz and Tim Scanlon in defining reasons as "facts that count in favor of some act" (See "Rationality and Reasons" in *Exploring Practical Philosophy*, Ashgate Press, 2001, p. 121). In *On What Matters*, Parfit says instead that reasons are *given by* facts, such as the fact that an act is pleasant (p. 31). With this analysis, few would disagree. The crucial questions are: what *kinds* of facts provide reasons, and *how* do they do so? Parfit parses theories of practical reasons into two broad classes. According to desire-based theories, only facts that are capable of engaging an agent's motivations are potential sources of reasons. Thus, for example, if the prospect of spending your leisure time listening to Elvis Presley leaves you cold, this may be an indication that you have no reason to do so. Two examples of this sort of view are the instrumental theory of Richard Brandt, and the internalist theory of Bernard Williams. Both are versions of what Parfit calls "deliberative" desire-based theories, because both ground normative reasons in desires that survive (or would survive) informed deliberation.

According to value-based theories, in contrast, practical reasons are provided by the objective (or "agent-neutral") value of some action, object, or outcome (p. 45). Joseph Raz and Thomas Nagel are clear proponents of this view. Value-based theories imply that whether you have a reason to listen to Elvis records, or to use them as cocktail coasters, depends on the intrinsic value of the records themselves, or on the instrumental value of using them to procure an intrinsically valuable outcome (such as pleasure, relaxation, etc.). In defending a value-based theory, Parfit answers what *kinds* of facts provide reasons – those that have or are

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capable of yielding agent-neutral value. But he fails to answer *how* the alleged value of certain facts provides reasons, and *why* agent-relative values cannot ground reasons.

Parfit's distinction between desire-based and value-based theories of reasons could not be starker. Value-based theories deny that all reasons are provided by desires, but they also affirm the radical thesis that *no* reasons are provided by desires (p. 110). Parfit's value-based theory thus appears to be inconsistent with the Present Aim theory (P) – according to which "reasons are provided by our present desires or aims" – endorsed by his former self in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984). But this appearance is misleading. For what distinguishes the Critical version of P that Parfit endorses from other versions is that it implies (contra Hume) that some particular desires, and not just sets of desires, are contrary to reason, and that other desires are required by reason (that is, it implies that we have non-derivative reasons to rid ourselves of some desires and to acquire other desires). Since this is the core claim of value-based theories, we can justly construe the Critical Present Aim Theory as a value-based rather than an aim-based theory of reasons, and thereby preserve continuity between the theory of reasons first sketched in *Reasons and Persons* and further developed in *On What Matters*. This is not to say that many will find Parfit's account of reasons satisfactory. But it does appear to be consistent with his earlier view, and many moral realists will undoubtedly find it appealing.

The same cannot be said of Parfit's account of the relationship between reasons and rationality. According to Parfit, while people's reasons are provided by facts, "what it would be rational for people to do depends on their *apparent* reasons, whether or not these reasons are real" (p. 35). Thus, Parfit thinks an action is rational if it is grounded in a *belief* that we have a reason to perform the action. Although it may be rational, on Parfit's account, for a masochist to sell himself into slavery, because he falsely believes slavery will be fun, he could never have a reason to do so. Reasons are provided by (value-laden) facts; rationality is relative to beliefs.

There is a curious asymmetry in Parfit's account of reasons, on the one hand, and rationality, on the other. Most of us believe that insofar as practical reasons and rationality are normative notions, they are conceptually tied to the deliberative context in which prospective courses of action are assessed. This context is characterized by limited time and information, cognitive constraints, and – what is most important – the belief and desire sets on the basis of which deliberators assess their prospects. But on Parfit's account, only rationality is tied to deliberation. We are practically rational, he concedes, even if we have false beliefs or eccentric desires, so long as those beliefs and desires play some role in explaining our actions, or in the way we justify our actions to ourselves and others. We act in accordance with our practical reasons, though, even if the reasons on which we act play no role in our deliberation or in the explanation of our actions. This is puzzling for a couple of reasons. First, why should normative reasons be exempt from the explanatory requirement that we impose on rationality? Second, why should we accept an account of normative reasons that ignores the context of deliberation, while insisting that our account of rationality must be closely tied to the context of deliberation?

Parfit might answer the first question by noting that if value-based theories are true, reasons for action may be inaccessible to a particular agent, so that attributing a normative reason to an agent does not necessarily help explain his action. But the second question poses a problem for Parfit if, as some suggest, normative reasons are sensitive to the same kinds of facts that determine whether an action is rational.

In explaining the relationship between practical reasons and moral principles, Parfit says "whether some act is wrong depends on what … we or others would have most reason to consent to, agree to, or want to … do. To know what these principles and theories imply, we must answer questions about reasons" (p. 149). This comment clearly indicates Parfit's awareness of the significance of his first five chapters, and it shows why we should carefully examine how the ship is constructed before attempting to use it to circumnavigate the moral globe. It also suggests that alterations in his theory of reasons will yield very different answers to the weighty questions Parfit hopes to answer.

Parfit's book is much more than a theory of practical reasons; it is a deep and illuminating excursion into Kant's moral theory and an ambitious attempt to unify principles that are widely considered incompatible. As an exercise in normative theory, *On What Matters* is exemplary – Parfit's meticulous analysis of the implications of Kant's various formulations of the categorical imperative is analytic philosophy at its best. But many of us might wonder whether the theory of reasons on which Parfit rests his substantive conclusions can survive scrutiny.

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