

On Parfit's disagreement with Nietzsche (by D*n*ld D*v*ds*n)

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Abstract. This paper presents a Davidsonian perspective on Derek Parfit's disagreements with Nietzsche. I have actually gone further, too far perhaps, and tried to imitate Davidson's attractive essayistic style.

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"If you broke the taboo and feel disgrace,

Then take the eyes out of your face!"

Human beings are moral beings. Though some may wish to deny the fact, we inevitably find ourselves appealing to moral values. We are outraged at a funeral met with laughter, say. But human beings as moral beings must also face the fact of moral disagreement. One group disagree with another in their moral judgments. A reaction to such disagreement is despair. There can be no resolution. And if there can be no resolution, moral values are not objective. But then why be moral at all?

Philosophers from Socrates to Kant to John McDowell have believed in the possibility of resolution and I share their optimism, though not the detail of their views. Derek Parfit confronts his differences with Nietzsche, including the view that suffering is good in itself. For Parfit, this is no challenge to the thesis that reflective beings with suitable knowledge, absent of distorting influences, would converge in moral judgments. Nietzsche's suffering was a distorting influence; to hold that suffering is good in itself enabled him to cope (2011: 572).

Parfit writes of a thrilling claim that is clearly false, but do we even understand what is claimed? An interpreter arrives among Nietzsche's master race. She finds that they utter strings of noises. Under what circumstances would she be justified in attributing to them a sentence meaning "Suffering is good in itself"? Genuine suffering is what we have reason to avoid, unless reason itself finds in it a means. Any interpreter who entertained the hypothesis that one of the native sentences meant that would have grounds for preferring an alternative interpretation. The interpreter has no choice but to take the natives as largely correct by her lights, if she is to make sense of their language at all.

Individuals or groups who disagree take different perspectives on a shared matter, but there can be no disagreement without much common ground. Too little common ground and we wonder, are they even talking about the same thing? Meanwhile, with common ground comes method for resolving disagreement.

Note: even without Davidson's theoretical apparatus, why does Parfit assume that he and Nietzsche are talking about the same thing, given that in Parfitese "Suffering is valuable in itself" is so obviously false?

Reference

Parfit, D. 2011. *On What Matters, Volume 2*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.