

OBITUARY

Derek Parfit

Endearingly eccentric moral philosopher who was spoken of in the same breath as John Stuart Mill

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Derek Parfit, pictured in 2015. He bought dozens of sets of identical trousers and shirts so as not to agonise over what to wear

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“Dear David. I hope you won’t be too disappointed. But I’m writing to ask you not to publish this article.”

David Edmonds, the philosopher and broadcaster, was not disappointed. He was distraught. He had spent days researching and writing a draft of a long piece (for *Prospect* magazine) about the unusual marriage of Derek

Parfit and his wife, also an important philosopher, Janet Radcliffe Richards. Parfit had been unhappy with a few aspects of a *New Yorker* profile of him, and so Edmonds thought it wise to fact-check his effort. Parfit said that Edmonds had committed numerous errors, which he then detailed over two pages.

As Edmonds went through them, he realised that he had emailed a document containing his half-formed ideas and jottings by mistake. Only Derek Parfit could have believed that this gobbledegook was intended for publication. If you told him that a set of rambling non sequiturs was to appear in a prestigious periodical, that was what he believed.

Parfit was one of the most important — if not the most important — moral philosophers in the world. Some of his contemporaries go further, making a compelling case that Parfit belongs to an elite canon alongside three other British philosophers in the utilitarian tradition: Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Henry Sidgwick.

In 2011 Parfit — who possessed an otherworldly gaze, a distinctive shock of snow-white hair and several endearingly eccentric habits — published *On What Matters*, in two volumes; a third is due to be published this year. They are,

in essence, about whether there is such a thing as objective truth in ethics. Parfit makes the case that there is. He felt that if there were not, he had somehow wasted his life. However, it is his 1984 book, *Reasons and Persons*, that made his reputation. “Close to a work of genius,” reads one of the blurbs on the back cover — and, for once, it is not an exaggeration.

Although not to everyone’s liking, Parfit’s work is clear, precise, rigorous, unpretentious and ingenious. His thought experiments are delightfully inventive. One of the areas for which he is best known is personal identity: what is it about me now that makes me the same person as a particular little boy who existed some years ago? Parfit imagines what we would say about a person, person X, if the two hemispheres of her brain were separated, and each transplanted into a different body — Y and Z. Y and Z would share the same memories as X. Each might believe that they were X. Yet which would really be X? Both? Neither? Parfit, in the Lockean tradition, maintains that continued existence just consists in psychological continuity; there is no further fact, no further essence of identity.

Equally significant is his work on future generations, an area in moral philosophy that

he almost single-handedly devised. What obligations do we have to future generations? What is the ideal population size? Are we doing something good if we cause a person to exist who has a life that is worth living? He spotted a puzzle. Suppose a government decides to deplete some crucial resource, so that in a few generations people are badly off. Different policies affect who will be born (as Parfit puts it, try to imagine whether you would be here if the car had not been invented). The decision to deplete resources might bring it about that, in several generations, there would be nobody alive who would have been alive if a different policy had been adopted instead. If so, this depletion policy would not be worse for anyone who ever lives. Yet we still want to say that it is wrong. Parfit concludes that if in either of the two outcomes the same number of people would live, we should choose the outcome in which people are better off, even if we cannot point to a single individual who is better off.

Another important contribution was to “equality”. Parfit imagines that there are two populations who have no contact with each other. One population has a higher average income and/or is happier than the other. Suppose we make everyone in this population poorer, or less happy, so that the Universe is

more equal. Have we thereby made the Universe a better place? Surely not, he argues. Equality, in other words, cannot be of intrinsic importance.

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**His future wife
received ‘the most
remarkable chat-
up letter in history’**

Derek Parfit was
born in Chengdu,
China, in 1942.
His parents,
Norman and
Jessie, who met at
Oxford

University, were Christian missionaries who taught preventive medicine. They grew disillusioned with the notion of evangelising Christianity in a culture already replete with sophisticated value systems and religious beliefs. They lapsed in their faith, but, somewhat contrarily, their seven-year-old son became devout, challenging his parents’ apostasy and declaring that he wanted to become a monk. By the age of eight he too had lost his faith, because he decided that a good God would not send people to Hell.

Parfit led a cloistered existence. He attended Eton, where he was a scholarship boy and went up to the Balliol College, Oxford to read history in 1961. From there he went as a Harkness Fellow to Harvard University, where he decided

to study philosophy. He then won a Prize Fellowship at that most rarefied of ivory towers, All Souls College, where his teaching commitments were minimal. He stayed there for the rest of his academic career.

His life was governed by the two dominating strands in his personality: perfectionism and monomania. Every 100 pages of his work would be distilled to ten. He was in his forties when *Reasons and Persons* was finally published. Before then, there had been mutterings in All Souls about not making his position permanent.

He worked all day, every day, from the time he woke up until late at night. He bought dozens of sets of identical trousers and shirts, so as not to agonise over what to wear. He ate the same food each day and would save valuable seconds by pouring hot water straight from the tap over a spoonful of instant coffee.

Parfit had one main hobby: photography. He would obsessively photograph Venice and St Petersburg; the same buildings, over and over again, each time in a slightly different light. However, when he began to think more about mortality, he gave that up too.

Only one interruption was allowed to come

between his thinking and writing. Scores of friends would send drafts of papers for him to comment on. Since he could read at astonishing speed, they were more often than not returned the next day, along with forensic and insightful notes. He often read the work of others when he was unable to concentrate with sufficient intensity on his own — for example, while he brushed and flossed his teeth. He apologised to a close friend for waiting till the next day to comment on a paper, because he had already cleaned his teeth that day.

Parfit is survived by his wife, whom he met in 1982. When she attended one of his lectures, Parfit found out who she was, read her book, *The Sceptical Feminist*, and wrote what she later described as “the most remarkable chat-up letter in history”. He was unaware that Radcliffe Richards had four other suitors.

The couple eventually married. He loved her very much, but did not seem to notice whether she was physically present — she was usually in London while he was in Oxford — although they talked every day. Radcliffe Richards thought that Parfit had Asperger’s; his literal mindedness was a part of that.

Parfit was a surpassingly kind and gentle man.

His death was unexpected. Although he felt he had plenty of philosophy still to do, death did not frighten him. He believed that psychological and physical continuity was all there was to identity, and this had proved strangely comforting. “My death will break the more direct relations between my present experiences and future experiences, but it will not break various other relations. This is all there is to the fact that there will be no one living who will be me. Now that I have seen this, my death seems to me less bad.”

Derek Parfit, philosopher, was born on December 11, 1942. He died on January 1, 2017, aged 74

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Great philosopher. Sorry I'll never meet him in person now... But we have his books!

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colin james 3 days ago

I would like to have asked him, has he made a difference..?