edited by

PETER SINGER

Does Anything Really Matter?

ESSAYS ON PARFIT ON OBJECTIVITY

DOES ANYTHING REALLY MATTER?

Derek Parfit, 1942–2017
A life that mattered

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

Impression: 1

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015953853

ISBN 978–0–19–965383–6

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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PREFACE

When Derek Parfit's two-volume, 1,400-page *On What Matters* appeared in 2011, it was widely hailed as a work of lasting philosophical significance. Much of the ensuing discussion, however, focused on those sections of the book in which Parfit argued that the best versions of three major contending traditions in normative ethics—Kantianism, contractualism, and rule consequentialism—are in fundamental agreement, identifying the same acts as wrong. Underlying and supporting this original and important argument, however, is another, more fundamental claim, also defended at considerable length: that there are objective moral truths, and other normative truths about what we have reasons to believe, and to want, and to do.

Skepticism about objective truth in ethics is as old as philosophy. Plato's *Republic* is an early attempt to rebut skeptical challenges about ethics, and perhaps an indication that Socrates, too, saw the need to challenge ethical relativism and ethical subjectivism. In contemporary English-language philosophy, most ethical skeptics or subjectivists trace the roots of their view to the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume. Hume assumes, and we commonly believe, that morality must be able to influence what we do. Otherwise, we may wonder, what is its point? But Hume also held that reason alone cannot move us to action. Our wants and desires determine our ultimate goals, and the role of reason is limited to telling us how best to achieve these goals. Reason applies to means, not ends. Hence, Hume famously held, it is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger, and equally not contrary to reason to choose my own total ruin to prevent a trivial harm to a stranger. Even acting contrary to one's own interests—preferring "my own acknowledged lesser good to my greater" is, on Hume's view, not contrary to reason. What it is rational for me to do depends on what I want.

If Hume is right both in his assumption about the relation between morality and action, and about the role of reason in action, then there is an obvious problem for those who think that moral judgments can be objectively true. Moral judgments will only be able to influence our actions if they somehow connect with our desires, and my desires may differ from yours without either of us making a mistake. Wants and desires are neither true nor false. An objectively true moral judgment would have to be true for everyone, irrespective of what he or she most desires, but what reason for acting would it offer to those whose desires are not furthered by acting on it?

Something like this line of argument has led most of the leading moral philosophers of the past eighty years—figures like A. J. Ayer, C. L. Stevenson, R. M. Hare, J. L. Mackie, Christine Korsgaard, Bernard Williams, Simon Blackburn, and Allan Gibbard—to reject the idea that our ethical judgments can be objectively true or false. Under varying names—emotivism, prescriptivism, constructivism, irrealism, or expressivism—they have embraced some form of ethical subjectivism or skepticism.

Parfit's critique of the forms of subjectivism that draw on Hume's view of the limits of practical reason begins with a discussion of the role of reason in a situation relating to self-interest rather than morality. He asks us to imagine a man who cares, as most of us do, about what pleasures or pains he will experience in future, but with this difference: if they will happen on a future Tuesday, he doesn't care about them at all. If he is contemplating what will happen to him on a Monday, a Wednesday, or any other day, he would much rather experience slight discomfort now than agony on that day; but if the agony will be on a future Tuesday, he doesn't care about it, and so will choose it over slight discomfort now. This man is not under any illusion that pains on future Tuesdays are less painful than pains on other days, for he knows that when that future Tuesday becomes the present day, the agony will be as terrible as it is on a Monday or Wednesday. He also knows that—since it will then not be a *future* Tuesday—he will not be at all indifferent to the agony he then experiences. Nor does he believe in a strange deity who will reward him for his indifference to what will happen to him on future Tuesdays. He differs from us purely in what he desires. Surely, Parfit claims, this man's

desires are irrational: "That some ordeal would be much more painful is a strong reason not to prefer it. That this ordeal would be on a future Tuesday is no reason to prefer it."

It is difficult to deny that such a man would be irrational, and the only possible source of this irrationality is his desires. But Hume's approach leaves no room for desires to be rational or irrational. Hume's followers may say that this a very odd set of desires to have, and that as far as we know no one has ever had this set of desires, but it remains conceivable that someone could have them, and that is enough to pose a problem for Hume's view. Moreover, many people have attitudes that are somewhat like future-Tuesday indifference. Many people put off going to the dentist, for instance, even though they are well aware that doing so will mean more pain overall than if they were to go to the dentist now. At least in extreme cases, these desires also seem to be irrational. But subjectivists about reason cannot, it seems, say that they are.

Similarly, subjectivists about reason cannot say that the fact that putting my hand in a flame will cause me agony is a reason not to put my hand in the flame. They must say that whether I now have a reason not to put my hand in the flame will depend on whether I now desire to avoid agony. Parfit thinks this is a mistake: desires do not give us reasons for acting. I may desire to experience agony, but that does not give me any reason to put my hand in the flame, since I have no reason to have this desire, and strong reason not to have it. Parfit grants that, on his view, reasons may not motivate us. Whether something will motivate me to act in a certain way is, he says, a psychological fact, and quite distinct from the normative fact that I have a reason to act in that way. I may have a reason to do something without being motivated to do it.

Since subjectivists deny that there are any objective, or object-given, reasons for acting, if Parfit is right that having a present desire for something does not give one a reason for acting, it would follow that on the subjectivist view we have no reasons for doing anything, and hence, though some things may matter to us, in a larger sense, nothing matters. Hence Parfit eschews any middle ground that would allow us to accept subjectivism but go on as if nothing much had changed. For him, if there are no ethical truths, nihilism awaits and his life has been wasted, as have the lives of others who have spent their time trying to work out what we

ought to do. In several of the papers that follow, this striking claim is discussed, and the authors try to show Parfit that, even though there are no ethical truths, in the robust sense of "truth" that Parfit is using, his life is very far from having been wasted.

Parfit rejects not only ethical subjectivism, but also ethical naturalism. To say that we have reason to reduce suffering, other things being equal, is to make a substantive normative claim that Parfit believes to be true, but it is not something that we can deduce from the meanings of moral terms like "good" or "ought." Here Parfit agrees with Hume that we cannot deduce an "ought" from an "is," meaning that no set of natural facts implies, on its own, any normative truths. We cannot identify normative truths with facts about the natural world, whether about our biological nature, about evolution, or about what we would approve of under some set of specified conditions, or any other causal or psychological fact.

How then do we come to know normative truths? Like many of his objectivist predecessors—Richard Price in the eighteenth century, Henry Sidgwick in the nineteenth, and W. D. Ross in the early twentieth, Parfit is an intuitionist. "We have," he writes, "intuitive abilities to respond to reasons and to recognize some normative truths." But these intuitive abilities are not, for Parfit, some special quasi-sensory faculty, nor do we use them to discover some mysterious new realm of non-natural facts. Rather, we come to see that we have reasons for doing some things, in something like the way in which we come to see that two plus two equals four. This rubs against the widely held metaphysical view that the world can be fully explained by reference to the kind of facts that are open to investigation by the natural sciences. Rejecting this view seems to open the way to believing in all kinds of spooky entities, and hence many non-religious philosophers have accepted metaphysical or ontological naturalism. Parfit does not defend non-natural religious beliefs, but argues that without irreducibly normative truths, nihilists would be right, for nothing would matter.

It is, for example, an irreducibly normative claim that if we establish that the premises of a valid argument are true, then we have a decisive reason for believing the conclusion of the argument. Thus Parfit challenges metaphysical naturalists: if the position you defend were true, he says, we could not have any reason to accept it, for there would be no

such reasons. It still might be true, but the only position we have any reason to hold is that metaphysical naturalism is false.

Some will object that even if we accept Parfit's arguments, it would be a pyrrhic victory for objectivism. He can overcome Hume's objections only by rejecting the assumption that morality must be capable of moving us to action. And what is the point of an objective morality, if we are not motivated to act in accordance with the moral truths it contains? Parfit could respond, like Kant, that insofar as we are rational beings, we will respond to the reasons that morality offers. And if we are not, well, the truths of morality would remain true even if no one were to act on them.

*

In 2010 I taught a graduate seminar at Princeton on the then-forthcoming *On What Matters*, using a draft that Parfit had made available for that purpose. In Part Six Parfit returns to the issue of objectivism in ethics that he had discussed in Part One, and criticizes, sometimes quite sharply, several prominent contemporary philosophers who defend contrary positions. Some of these philosophers were at Princeton or near enough to be able to visit Princeton during the semester, so I invited them to discuss Parfit's criticisms of their views. Harry Frankfurt, Frank Jackson, Mark Schroeder, and Simon Blackburn did so. The discussions we had with them shed light not only on Parfit's position, but also on the long-running debate about whether there can be objectively true normative statements. I thought if these discussions could include other philosophers with whom Parfit disagreed and be published, together with Parfit's responses, the resulting book would reinvigorate discussions of objectivism in ethics.

Not everyone I invited to contribute to this volume accepted my invitation, but many of them did, including leading advocates of expressivism, naturalism, and constructivism. To this I added two outstanding essays written by graduate students taking the class, Richard Chappell and Andrew Huddleston, as well as an essay by Bruce Russell, who supports intuitionist objectivism. The final chapter of this book, which I co-authored with Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek, was added at the urging of Peter Momtchiloff, Oxford University Press's editor for this book, and because Parfit thought that its inclusion would give him an opportunity, in his response, to clarify his views regarding the place of impartial reasons in morality.

The reader may already have noticed that Parfit's responses to the essays presented here are not to be found in this volume. That is because something unexpected happened. Peter Railton had suggested, in the last part of the defense of naturalism that he contributed to this volume, how he and Parfit might resolve their disagreements, and Parfit was delighted to accept this suggestion. Allan Gibbard, the quasi-realist expressivist, had previously claimed, in his *Meaning and Normativity*, that the best version of his expressivism would coincide, in its theses, with the best version of non-naturalism, if only non-naturalists would give up their belief that there are ontologically weighty non-natural normative properties—although, he added, the two views differ in the explanations they offer. Parfit claims in his response to Gibbard that non-realist cognitivism, which is the form of non-naturalism he defends, takes precisely the form that Gibbard said would coincide with his own view.

Parfit considered the prospect of resolving these meta-ethical disagreements to be of such significance that he wrote several chapters explaining why he thought this could be done, and invited both Railton and Gibbard to contribute additional essays presenting their views of the extent of this resolution. As a result, the essays by Railton and Gibbard that appear in this volume should be taken, not as their last word on the issues they are discussing, but as stages in a process that is all too rare in philosophy, in which defenders of positions that initially appear to be fundamentally opposed, instead of further entrenching their opposition, significantly reduce their meta-ethical disagreements. The additional contributions by Railton and Gibbard, however, added to Parfit's extensive discussions, meant that to publish everything in one volume would have made it unwieldy. Parfit and I therefore agreed that it would be better to publish the original critical essays on their own, as they now appear in this volume. Parfit's responses, together with the additional essays by Railton and Gibbard are appearing in a separate companion volume, to be published together with this, entitled *On What Matters, Volume Three*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My greatest debt is to the authors of the following essays, without whom there would have been no book. I am grateful not only for their contributions to the book, but also for the patience they showed while Derek Parfit was writing, revising, and expanding his responses. My gratitude to Parfit is manifold, first for allowing me to use, as the basic text for my graduate seminar, a pre-publication draft of the initial two volumes of *On What Matters*; second for agreeing to respond to the essays in this book; and third for working extraordinarily hard to complete his responses in time for them to appear together with this book. Balancing deadlines against the very proper concern to produce the best work one can is never easy, but I am delighted with the way in which Parfit managed it, and I am sure readers of *On What Matters, Volume Three* will be equally appreciative of his achievement.

I thank Peter Railton, Allan Gibbard, and Derek Parfit for their suggestions regarding the wording to be used, in the final two paragraphs of the Preface, to describe the extent of their agreement. Some passages in the Preface draw on my review of *On What Matters* in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 May 2011.

At Oxford University Press, Peter Momtchiloff supported the proposal from the beginning and was always helpful as it took shape. Emily Brand saw it smoothly through production, and Timothy Beck did an outstanding job with the copy-editing.

Derek Parfit's unexpected death on the second day of 2017 came as a shock and a loss to all of the contributors to this book. For those of us who knew Derek well, the feeling is personal, and we miss him deeply. And for all of us, no matter how sharp our philosophical differences with him may have been, there is a sense that the world of philosophy has lost an extraordinary presence, and will be the poorer for his absence.

We regret, of course, that Derek could not see the publication of this volume and its companion, *On What Matters, Volume Three*. At least we have the minor consolation that our essays stimulated him to defend and further develop his views on objectivity in ethics. These volumes will now remain as the last exchange of ideas he was able to have in print. His work on them was complete. The last thing he did on the books was to approve the final proof of his spectacular photograph of storm clouds over St Petersburg's Palace Square that is on the covers. He cared a great deal about the photograph, and was not satisfied with the colours of the first proof that he was shown, insisting on further proofs, even though that meant a delay in the publication of the books. Looking at the covers now, we can see why he was so particular about getting them right.

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HAS PARFIT'S LIFE BEEN WASTED? SOME REFLECTIONS ON PART SIX OF *ON WHAT MATTERS*

Larry S. Temkin

1. Introduction

It is my great pleasure to contribute to this volume of essays responding to Derek Parfit's *On What Matters*.[1] I have chosen to respond to Part Six, *Normativity*, which in my judgment is the book's most insightful and profound section, even as it is almost certain to be the most puzzling and infuriating for many readers. I have no doubt that this portion of the book alone will require and richly repay careful exploration and

[1] Oxford University Press, 2011. I would like to thank Peter Singer for inviting me to contribute to this volume, and for his useful feedback on an earlier draft. I would also like to thank Jeff McMahan, Frances Kamm, and Shelly Kagan for their many helpful comments. A special debt is owed to Derek Parfit, with whom I have had countless hours of extraordinarily fruitful discussions over the years about these and other topics. Finally, this essay was written while I was the Laurance S. Rockefeller Visiting Professor for Distinguished Teaching at Princeton's University Center for Human Values. I would like to thank everyone who helped make my visit to the Center possible and so enjoyable, especially Peter Singer and the Center's Director, Chuck Beitz.

analysis for generations to come. Accordingly, my hopes for this essay are quite limited. I merely want to call attention to a few of Parfit's claims that I find puzzling or worrisome, and give some sense for the source of my unease. Perhaps others will find it worthwhile to pursue some of the lines of inquiry that I can only broach here.

Before beginning, I'd like to start with a short story. Many years ago, when I was still a graduate student, I was attracted to the deepest problems of meta-ethics, and I tentatively planned to write a dissertation addressing those problems. One day, I was walking with Derek, and I asked him *his* views about meta-ethics. Derek looked at me, and very earnestly replied, "My views about meta-ethics? I don't do meta-ethics. I find it *much* too hard."[2] Being an individual who can (sometimes!) recognize and respond to reasons, I abandoned my plans to write a meta-ethics thesis on the spot. My reasoning was simple: "Too hard for Derek Parfit, too hard for me"!

Like Derek, I am a realist about reasons, and I believe that there are full-fledged normative *truths*. Here is an example of one such truth: the reasoning I engaged in when, as a graduate student, I abandoned my plan to write a thesis on meta-ethics was an example of *good* reasoning!

In any event, I was pleased when I learned, some years later, that Derek had changed his mind. He now thought that it *was* possible for him to make progress on some of the deepest meta-ethical issues. I think he was right, and that Part Six does exactly that. At the very least, I think that Derek greatly illuminates the differences between competing meta-ethical positions, and gives the strongest arguments yet on offer for the respectability of an approach to normativity that involves externalism, objectivity, realism, non-naturalism, and what he calls "irreducible normative truths."[3] Moreover, I find myself largely in agreement with most of his positive meta-ethical claims. Still, in the customary philosophical way (one, which I recognize, is not altogether healthy for the profession!), in this essay, I shall not focus on the many major points where I

[2] Given the passage of time, this may not be an exact quote. But it is pretty close, especially the last two sentences, which were especially memorable.

[3] Arguably, "externalism," "objectivity," "realism," "non-naturalism," and "irreducible normative truths" are all terms of art for Derek, but for my purposes, here, it is not necessary to delineate the distinctive ways in which he understands these notions.

find Derek's claims compelling. Instead, I want to focus on some claims that I find somewhat problematic. In doing this, I am acutely aware, and remind the reader, that for the most part those aspects of Derek's account that I find problematic pale in their significance in comparison with those aspects that I find congenial.

The remainder of the essay is divided into four sections. In Section 2, I suggest that we reject Parfit's claim that normative facts have no *causal* impact on the natural world. In Section 3, I argue that the gap between Parfit's favored externalist view and that of his internalist opponents is not quite as large as it may seem in reading Part Six. In particular, I note two internalist insights that externalists should accept; namely, that in an important sense practical reasons *do* depend on something internal to us, and that there is, indeed, an important and intimate connection between reasons and motivation. In Section 4, I dispute Parfit's contention that unless his meta-ethical view is correct, nothing matters, and his life has been wasted. In Section 5, I conclude the essay with a brief summary.

2. *On the Causal Efficacy of Normative Reasons*

Parfit claims that normative truths have no causal impact on the natural world.[4] I don't believe that a lot hinges on this claim, but I confess that I find it puzzling. Parfit begins Chapter 1 of *On What Matters* with the sentence, "We are the animals that can both understand and respond to reasons."[5] As the book unfolds, variations of this sentence and the idea it expresses prove to be one of the main mantras of the book.[6]

I agree that we (often) understand or, as I also like to put it, recognize and respond to reasons. But if, as Parfit claims, we often *respond* to reasons, why not add that in those cases where we *are* responding to reasons, those reasons have had a *causal* impact on our actions? I think that on both of the major philosophical accounts of causation—the counterfactual model and the deductive-nomological model—reasons would count as

[4] See, for example, *On What Matters* (henceforth, *OWM* in citations), II, 306, 497, 503, 510, 517–18, 532, 618.
[5] *OWM*, I, 31.
[6] See, for example, *OWM*, I, 32, 48, 51, 78, 100; *OWM*, II, 307, 310, 414, 423, 461, 497, 503, 510, 515, 528, 531, 540, 544, 547, and 620.

having a causal impact on our actions. Given this, I see no compelling reason to avoid claiming that reasons, or normative facts, can have a causal impact on us and, a fortiori, that they can have a causal impact, through us, on the world.

I don't want to get into all the tricky details of the metaphysics of causation, or all the many qualifications, and bells and whistles, that might be added in any *fully* adequate account of causation. Instead, let me just sketch the basis of my reasoning on a standard counterfactual account of causation, and leave the analogous sketch for the deductive-nomological model to the reader.

On a standard counterfactual (or "but for") account of causation, we say that in a typical example of causation (ignoring problems of overdetermination and such) *A* is a cause of *B* whenever it is the case that "but for" *A*, *B* wouldn't have occurred. Slightly more technically, we typically say that *A* is a cause of *B* whenever it is true that in the closest possible world in which *A* didn't occur, *B* didn't occur.[7]

Here is a simple example. A gust of wind arises, blowing a piece of paper from one end of the room to the other. We say that the gust of wind caused the paper to move across the room, if we think it is true that in the closest possible world in which the gust of wind didn't arise the paper would not have moved across the room.[8] Here is another simple example. I am driving along the road at fifty miles an hour when I put my foot on the brake, bringing the car to a stop. Here, we might say that my putting the foot on the brake caused the car to stop, because had I not done so the car wouldn't have stopped.

Importantly, there can be more than one cause of any given event—and in most cases there will, in fact, be an indefinitely large number of

[7] For the classic discussion of counterfactuals, and their implications for our understanding of causation, see David Lewis's *Counterfactuals* (Basil Blackwell and Harvard University Press, 1973).

[8] Recall that I am here ignoring the problem cases of overdetermination and their related cousins. So, if John was *just about* to pick up the piece of paper and carry it across the room when the gust of wind arose, we want to say that the gust of wind caused the paper to cross the room even though it looks as if the paper would have moved across the room even if the wind hadn't arisen. Various moves are available on a counterfactual account of causation to handle such cases, but since this is an essay on normativity, and not an essay on the metaphysics of causation, I shan't pursue them here.

causes. In the car example, it may also be the case that, *in addition to* my putting my foot on the brake, the light's turning red caused the car to stop. This is because "but for" the light's turning red I would have left my foot on the accelerator and continued driving along the road at fifty miles an hour.

Given that there can be many causes of any given event, it seems plain that when an event involves an *action* of a rational agent, *one* of the causes of the action can be *the reasons* that led the agent to perform that action. That is, recognizing and responding to the normative fact that I *ought* to stop—that is, to the reasons that there are for stopping in a country where the rules of the road require that drivers stop at red lights, and where the possible consequences of failing to stop can be dire—I put my foot on the brake, bringing my car to a halt. Had the reasons been different—for example, had stopping at the red light posed a grave threat to me or others, while running the red light would have been the safest course of action—then assuming that I was able to recognize and appropriately respond to the reasons that those natural facts give rise to, I would have *acted* differently and *not* stopped the car. Accordingly, "but for" my reasons to stop I would *not* have stopped, and so, on a counterfactual account of causation, we should *rightly* say that the normative fact that I had good reason to stop, or that I ought to have stopped, had a causal impact on my stopping.

The preceding type of story applies in countless cases to the actions of rational agents. Parfit recognizes that there might be normative facts, or truths, of the following sort: one ought to provide for one's own future well-being; one ought to provide for the well-being of one's children; or one ought to provide for the well-being of those less fortunate. Parfit also thinks that rational agents are capable of understanding and responding to such normative facts. Accordingly, it might well be that recognizing and responding to one normative truth, DP goes out of his way to have a yearly physical with his doctor; that responding to a different normative truth, LT spends ridiculous amounts of time filling out reimbursement forms so that he will have a larger nest egg to leave to his children; and that responding to yet another normative truth, PS writes a substantial yearly check to Oxfam. Accordingly, on Parfit's view it makes perfect sense to claim that, in each case, "but for" the normative

truths in question the agents would have acted differently. That is, if Parfit is right that humans are often able to understand and respond to reasons, then it makes perfect sense to suppose that *if* the normative truths applying in any given choice situation had not been present—either because the context had changed so that different normative truths applied, or (*per impossibile*) because there were different normative truths or no normative truths—then the individuals would have acted differently. That is enough, I think, for us to rightly claim that reasons, or normative facts, can have a causal impact on the world, via the will and actions of the rational agents who recognize and respond to them.

Indeed, even an agent who merely *understands* or *recognizes* a reason as such, or a normative fact to be true, without ever *responding* to that fact in the sense of *acting* on the basis of it, will be in a brain state that she would have not been in "but for" the reason or fact in question. On a counterfactual account of causation, that is enough, I think, for it to be true that the reason or normative fact had a causal impact on the world.

Why might someone want to deny that normative facts of the sort Parfit believes in have a causal impact on the world? Several considerations might underlie such a view. First, one might hold such a position for terminological reasons, claiming that what we *mean* when we say that *A* causes *B*, entails that *A* is a natural event, and on Parfit's view normative facts are neither events nor natural. Second, one might claim that to have a causal impact on the world, or at least on the natural world, one must be a *part* of the natural world in the way that tables, chairs, balls, and the events involving such objects are a part of the world, and that Parfit's non-natural normative facts fail to meet this criterion. Third, one might think that we have a fairly good understanding of the mechanisms that explain how objects in the natural realm might have a causal impact on other objects in the natural realm, but absolutely *no* understanding of the mechanisms that would explain how non-natural entities might have a causal impact on natural entities, or even of how interaction between such utterly distinct realms *might* be possible, and this should be enough to make one suspicious as to the possibility that non-natural entities might have a causal impact on the natural world. Fourth, relatedly, one might suppose that the view that non-natural facts can have a *causal* impact on natural facts would be akin to the view of

substance dualists, that immaterial substances can have a causal impact on material substances, and vice versa. Recognizing that the difficulty of understanding and explaining how the latter could be true ultimately led many to abandon substance dualism in favor of some form of substance monism—typically, some form of materialism—one might hope to avoid a similar fate for the view that there are both non-natural normative facts and natural facts, by denying that belief in the existence of non-natural normative facts commits one to believing that such facts have a *causal* impact on the natural world. Fifth, one might point out that *causes* of events in the natural world are the domain of science, but that non-natural normative facts are the domain of philosophy and not science, and hence that non-natural normative facts are not causes of events in the natural world (if they were, they would be studied by scientists, which they clearly are not!). Finally, one might think that accepting the view that non-natural normative facts can have a causal impact on the natural world commits one to a belief in the "supernatural," or the "occult," or the "mystical," which no right-thinking philosopher or scientist would want to do. Accordingly, one might think that even if one accepts, as Parfit does, that there *are* non-natural normative facts, one should avoid saddling such a position with the further view that such facts can have a *causal* impact on the natural world, so as to avoid the unwelcome implications that come with that further view.

Let me briefly respond to such concerns. First, although many people believe that causation is a relation that only obtains between *events*—so that if *A* causes *B*, *A* and *B* must both be events—this would not be sufficient reason to deny that normative facts can have a causal impact, or play a causal role in the world, on the grounds that normative facts are not events. After all, we routinely recognize that rocks are the sort of things that can have causal impact on windows (which are certainly part of the world!), even if we insist that, strictly speaking, it is not the rock, itself, that causes the window to break, but the event that consists in the rock's striking the window with sufficient force. The point is that were it not for the rock, the event that consists of the rock's striking the window would not have obtained, and that is sufficient for us to rightly claim that the rock played a causal role, or had a causal impact, on the world, when it struck the window, thereby causing it to break. Similarly, one might

claim that even if it is true that, strictly speaking, it is not the normative fact that John ought to do *A*, itself, that causes John to do *A*, but rather it is John's understanding and appropriately responding to that normative fact, as long as it is true that were it not for the obtaining of that normative fact John would not have recognized and responded to it by doing *A*, that is sufficient for us to rightly claim that the normative fact played a causal role or had a causal impact on the world, when it led, via John's understanding and appropriately responding to it, to John's doing *A*.

Second, Parfit distinguishes between "narrow" and "wide" senses of "exist," allowing him to contend that possible objects, mathematical truths, and non-natural normative facts exist in the "wide" sense, even if they don't exist in the "narrow" sense in which tables, chairs, and other members of the "natural" world exist.[9] Accordingly, one might similarly contend that even if one grants the terminological point that there is *a* sense of "cause," a *narrow* sense, in which only *natural* entities can have a causal impact on the world, that is compatible with there being *another* sense of "cause," a *wide* sense, in which non-natural entities, including normative facts, can have a causal impact on the world. One might then add that a wide sense of cause is every bit as respectable as a narrow sense, given that it relies on the same fundamental account of causation (either a counterfactual account, as discussed above, or a deductive-nomological account).

Third, Parfit considers the possibility that there might have been a god of the sort that many theists believe in.[10] By hypothesis, such a god would have been an all-powerful being who existed outside of space and time—a non-natural, indeed, supernatural being who would have been capable of miraculously influencing the course of natural events merely through the exercise of her Divine Will. If we knew that such a god existed, and had commanded the Red Sea to part, and that as a result the Red Sea parted, I think virtually everyone would agree that god had *caused* the Red Sea to part. Since, by hypothesis, if god *hadn't* commanded the Red Sea to part it wouldn't have parted (at least not in the closest possible world), that would be sufficient reason for most people

[9] *OWM*, II, 469–70.
[10] *OWM*, II, 306–7.

to claim that god caused it to part (at least in a *wide* of sense of cause, assuming that there is, indeed, a *narrow* sense of cause which is restricted to merely natural events). But notice, most people would say this even granting that god isn't a part of the natural world, even granting that we have absolutely *no* understanding of the mechanisms that would explain *how* a non-natural entity like god could have a causal impact on the natural realm, and even granting that god and her relations with the world are best studied by theologians and philosophers, rather than scientists.

Reflecting on the possible causal impact of a supernatural god on the natural realm casts doubt, I believe, on the cogency of the first, second, third, and fifth considerations, discussed previously, for denying that non-natural normative facts could have a causal impact on the natural world.

As for the fourth consideration, it isn't clear that the view that non-natural facts can have a *causal* impact on natural facts needs to be as (seemingly) intractable or problematic as the view that immaterial substances can have a causal impact on material substances, and vice versa. While many people have a hard time understanding what immaterial substances are, or how there could be such *things*, few are puzzled about the claim that there are mathematical facts, like "2 + 2 = 4," or logical facts, like "all lemons are lemons," even though they recognize that such facts are non-natural, in the sense that they don't exist *in the world* in the way that tables, chairs, and electrons do, and are not subject to the laws governing the natural realm which are studied by scientists. Likewise, few are puzzled about the claim that there are facts like "tables, chairs, and electrons exist in the world," even though such facts are *also* non-natural, in the sense that the *facts themselves* don't exist *in the world* in the way that the objects they refer to, or are about—namely, tables, chairs, and electrons—do, and in the sense that such facts are not *themselves* subject to the laws governing the natural realm which are studied by scientists. Similarly, many people can accept that there are normative facts, like "if you believe that *A* implies *B*, and you believe that *A*, then you *ought* to believe *B*," or "you ought to avoid senseless agony," even though such facts are *also* non-natural, in the sense that they don't exist *in the world* in the way that tables, chairs, and electrons do, and are not subject to the laws governing the natural realm which are studied by scientists.

Moreover, if one believes that we have evolved as beings with a faculty of, or capacity to, reason, so that as Parfit suggests, "We are the animals that can both understand and respond to reasons,"[11] then it needn't seem deeply puzzling or mysterious how non-natural facts could have a causal impact on the natural world. They could have such an impact when we, who are members of the natural world, employ our powers of reasoning to *discover* or understand or recognize such facts (which are *not* immaterial substances!), and when we then appropriately *respond* to such facts in forming or performing our beliefs, desires, or actions.

Moreover, my own view is that far from casting doubt on whether we should accept the possibility of there being non-natural normative facts, contending that non-natural facts can have a causal impact on the natural realm is part of the most plausible and coherent picture for believing that there are such facts. After all, if one believes that there are no causal connections between non-natural normative facts and the natural world, then presumably we could provide a *full causal* account of *all* of our beliefs, desires, and actions—which are, after all, part of the natural world—in terms of other features of the natural world. In that case, one need not appeal to non-natural normative facts to explain any features of our empirical world, and so, applying Ockham's Razor, it might seem perfectly reasonable to abandon our belief in non-natural normative facts, and to dispense with all talk about such facts. If, on the other hand, we believe that non-normative facts *can* have a causal impact on the natural world, we might continue to believe in, and correctly appeal to such facts, in order to best explain many observable facts in the natural realm.

Why did John believe, desire, or do what he did? In some cases, at least, it seems the correct answer to such a question is that he did so, in part, because he understood, or recognized, certain non-natural normative facts and *responded* to them appropriately! Had the non-natural facts been different, John would have believed, desired, or acted differently. That is enough, I think, to make it true that the relevant non-natural normative facts *caused* John to believe, desire, or do what he did (at least in a plausible, and natural, *wide* sense of "cause").

[11] *OWM*, I, 31.

Finally, as Parfit recognizes, there are many who believe that talk of "non-natural normative facts" or "irreducible normative truths" commits one to "supernatural," "occult," or "mystical" metaphysical and epistemological views that no right-thinking philosopher or scientist should accept. John Mackie held such a belief, and it formed the basis of his arguments from metaphysical and epistemological queerness which he offered in opposition to the kind of non-natural normative view that Parfit espouses.[12] Parfit rejects the arguments from queerness,[13] and I believe he is right to do so. But for now, the key point I want to make is that any worries about the "supernatural," "occult," or "mystical" nature of non-natural normative facts or irreducible normative truths arise *independently* of, and are not, I think, exacerbated or compounded by, the issue of how there could be a *causal* interaction between non-natural facts and the natural world. That is, I think the "mysteries," if there are any, concern how there could *be* such non-natural normative facts, or how we could ever come to be *acquainted* with such facts, if there are any. Once we "solve" such "mysteries," and come to understand the sense in which there can be such facts and how, through our reason, we can recognize and respond to them, I don't see that there would be any *further* "mystery" to be solved as to how such facts could have a causal impact on the natural world.

If, through our reason, we *can* discover, or understand, or recognize non-natural normative facts, and then respond to them appropriately, then such normative facts can influence our beliefs, desires, or actions. Accordingly, as we have argued, such facts will sometimes have a causal impact on the world in a perfectly straightforward and non-mysterious way—this will be so as long as it is true that *if* the non-normative facts had been different, our beliefs, desires, or actions would have been different.

Perhaps there is another reason why Parfit wants to deny the causal efficacy of non-natural normative facts. But I fail to see what it is. Indeed, as suggested previously, I think that it is harder to see why one should believe that there are non-natural normative facts, or that we have the

[12] See Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin Books, 1977), Chapter 1.
[13] See *OWM*, II, Chapters 30–2.

capacity to understand and respond to them, if one grants that such normative facts have *no* causal impact on the natural world. In sum, given Parfit's beliefs, which I share, that there are non-natural normative facts and that we have the capacity to understand and respond to such facts, I think the most plausible and coherent view is that such facts *can* have a causal impact on the natural world. They do so whenever our beliefs, desires, and actions are shaped by them, via the appropriate use of our capacity to reason.[14]

3. *Reducing the Distance between Internalism and Externalism*

Much of Parfit's effort in *On What Matters* attempts to reduce the apparent distance between three major moral theories: Kantianism, Contractualism, and Consequentialism. Instead of discussing these theories solely in the terms by which they are typically understood and defended by their staunchest advocates, Parfit tries to develop what he regards as the best, most defensible, version of each type of theory. When he does so, he finds, or so he argues, that far from being incompatible with each other, each theory supports each other, and is part of a single, coherent, *Triple Theory*, that is the most acceptable, or true, moral theory. Echoing a thought he attributes to Mill, Parfit suggests that, on reflection, we can see that advocates of the three great moral theories have been "climbing the same mountain on different sides."[15]

Whatever one thinks of the ultimate success of Parfit's argument that there is one true moral theory that at the same time captures and expresses the most fundamental insights of Kantianism, Contractualism, and Consequentialism, it is hard not to be struck by the *spirit* with which he approaches this task. Instead of focusing solely on the many points of deep disagreement between the competing theories, Parfit seeks to find points of agreement or mutually supporting insights and arguments.

[14] Note, my discussion here is not intended to convince Parfit's opponents of the causal efficacy of non-natural normative facts. My aim is simply to suggest that for someone who holds a position like Parfit's, it makes more sense to accept than to deny that non-natural normative facts can have an effect on the natural realm.

[15] *OWM*, I, 419. See, also, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 114.

Curiously, however, this attitude, which I find both strikingly refreshing and deeply admirable, and which pervades much of the first five parts of the book, seems to largely disappear in Part Six.

Although Parfit continues to *express* the view that it is important, wherever possible, to reduce apparent areas of disagreement about meta-ethical issues, and even goes so far, in advocating this position, as to suggest that many of his meta-ethical opponents either don't have the same concepts of reasons or normativity that he, Parfit, has,[16] or that they often fail to understand, remember, or accurately reflect their own "actual" views,[17] in fact, as one reads Part Six, one has the overwhelming sense that the differences between Parfit's position and everyone else's are utterly unbridgeable, and that no insights of the opposing positions might usefully support or illuminate each other. That is, my own sense in reading Part Six is that Parfit offers his reader a stark either/or, all-or-nothing proposition: either accept the kind of externalist, objectivist position that he favors, according to which there are non-natural normative facts and corresponding irreducible normative truths, or be reduced to a bleak position akin to nihilism or skepticism about values, according to which nothing—absolutely nothing!—matters.[18]

For much of my life, I have thought about various competing meta-ethical views in much the same way as I have just portrayed them. Basically, I thought that one must either be an "objectivist" who believed in robust, full-fledged notions of Morality, Values, and Reasons (yes, with *capitals* M, V, and R!) or, however much one might *talk* about "morality," "values," and "reasons," one was merely a "subjectivist," at best, whose views were akin to skepticism about the normative realm (or Normative Realm, as I thought of it). And I confess, to a large extent, I continue to have great sympathy for a view of that kind. Yet, as I read Part Six, I kept thinking that despite the enormous substantive differences between them, the various competing meta-ethical views *couldn't* be, and *weren't*, quite as diametrically opposed as Parfit's tone suggested. So, in the conciliatory spirit that pervades most of Parfit's wonderful

[16] See, for example, *OWM*, II, 271–2, 293–4, 411, 434–9, 447–8, 552–3, 600, 603.
[17] See, for example, *OWM*, I, 70, 93, 96, 100; II, 456–7, 595, 603.
[18] See, for example, *OWM*, I, 107; II, 267, 275, 282, 291, 295, 310, 339, 368, 410, 419, 442, 453, 465, 601.

book, let me suggest two respects in which the contrast between Parfit's view and that of some of his opponents need not be quite so stark and seemingly all-or-nothing.

Parfit rightly notes that one of the central claims of many *internalists* is that there is a fundamental connection between the notion of a *reason* and the notion of *motivation*.[19] For most internalists, reasons must always be reasons *for* someone, and something can only be a reason *for* someone if it is capable of *motivating* or *moving* the agent (typically, to act). But, internalists argue, for something to actually motivate someone to act, it must somehow get a grip on them, or somehow get a "hook" in them, and this will only be the case if there is something *in* the agent or *about* the agent that enables this to happen. For someone like Williams, for something to be a reason *for* an agent, there must be something already *in* the agent's "subjective motivational set, *S*"—which may include the agent's beliefs, desires, dispositions, or other intentional states—which will explain how that reason can succeed in motivating the agent.[20]

Gil Harman argues for his social convention theory of morality largely on internalist grounds.[21] He claims that there could be a clear-thinking, fully-informed hit man from Murder, Incorporated, who wasn't motivated not to kill his innocent target, without thereby being in *any* way irrational.[22] Harman takes this as evidence that the hit man has no *reason* not to kill his innocent target, since, Harman thinks, if he *did* have a reason not to kill he *would* be motivated not to kill his target. From this, Harman concludes that the hit man has no moral obligation not to kill his victim, since he agrees that there is a connection between moral obligations and what one has a reason (and hence would be motivated) to do. Harman goes on to suggest that only if the hit man *accepted* a relevant social convention against killing the innocent, where such acceptance would involve developing the appropriate beliefs, desires, dis-

[19] See, for example, *OWM*, I, 75, 109–10; II, 268, 270–1, 277–8, 381, 421, 435–7, 441, 446, 449.
[20] See Williams's classic paper "Internal and External Reasons," reprinted as Chapter 8 in his collection of essays, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).
[21] See "Moral Relativism Defended" (*The Philosophical Review*, 84, 1975: 3–22), "Relativistic Ethics: Morality as Politics" (*Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, III, 1978: 109–21), and *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1977).
[22] "Moral Relativism Defended," 5–6.

positions, and intentional states so that, to put it in Williams's terms, his motivational set, *S*, now included the elements that would motivate him to abide by the convention against killing the innocent, could we rightly say that he had a moral obligation and reason not to kill the innocent.

Parfit has much to say about the internalist position, but one of the key claims he makes is that by correlating the notions of *reason* and *motivation* in the way that they do, internalists show that they are concerned with a *psychological* notion of reason, rather than the *normative* notion of reason with which Parfit is concerned.[23] Parfit insists that in asking "What *ought* I to do?" he is asking for *advice*; he is asking what he has most, or decisive, or sufficient reason to do. For Parfit, the answer to the *normative* question of what a person ought, or should, or has reason to do, depends on what non-natural, and irreducible normative facts obtain, and these are external in the sense that they do not depend on the particular internal makeup of the person.[24] Parfit wants to know what, if anything, he is *justified* in believing, desiring, or doing, and he regards that as a normative question that is wholly distinct from the purely psychological question that he thinks the internalist is concerned with, namely, given a person's subjective motivational set, *S*, what factors and circumstances would motivate him to believe in, desire, or do certain things.

So, to note one example, for Parfit, undeserved suffering is bad, it is bad in all possible worlds, and its badness in no way depends on anyone's internal features or makeup. Accordingly, for Parfit, that I have reason to avoid undeserved suffering is true independently of what I happen to want or desire and, more generally, is true independently of whatever beliefs, desires, dispositions, or other intentional states make up my current subjective motivational set, *S*.

[23] *OWM*, I, 107–10; *OWM*, II, 268–71, 421, 429.

[24] Of course, a person's internal features may be relevant to what normative facts *apply* in any given situation, but not to what normative facts there are. For example, if my constitution is such that I enjoy chocolate ice cream but not vanilla, then that will be relevant to whether you ought to provide me with chocolate or vanilla ice cream in certain circumstances. But, for Parfit, the normative truth guiding you—roughly, that other things equal one should promote greater happiness—does not *itself* depend on my, or anyone else's, internal features.