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Book Review

Reading Parfit On What Matters

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It is not easy to give a straightforward assessment of this collection. We have about a dozen essays, of varying quality and originality, and commentary on these arguments, at the end, by Parfit himself. Sometimes the arguments are interesting and novel, sometimes they quite artificial and dull. And so, moving, as Parfit himself does, from talk of “values” to talk of “reasons,” it is then also hard, at least for me, to say how good the reasons to read this book are. But I do not think my difficulty on offering a decisive verdict here reflects anything unusual about me. As I will try to show in the essay below, the collection very much reflects certain pervasive features of meta ethics today, and these features - the needlessly technical language, an essentialist conception of the object of analysis (“the good”), and a distaste for connecting talk of value to everyday experience - often makes for hard reading. In addition, of course, the difficulty of assessing this collection just reflects a natural problem in meta-ethics, and so what is also a central theme of Parfit’s: the objectivity of normative judgments, and the elusive connection between what is good and how we feel.

In what follows I will do the following. I will say something about the collection generally, its focus and its tone, where it is rewarding, where frustrating. I will also say something about some of the particular papers found therein, enough at least so readers have some idea as to what they can find there. I then want to offer an extended discussion of some of the issues that are raised in this collection. There is first the question of how to understand the relation between the normative and the natural; indeed, whether the normative might just *be* the natural. Of course, different philosophers will always have strong conflicting intuitions on this issue, and we should not wish it otherwise. But I will also argue that once certain assumptions that typically frame this issue are set aside, we may be able to find more room for agreement than is typically acknowledged. And so, in offering an account of what I think the right natural – normative relation is, I will also be offering what one might call a “conciliatory” account that seeks to widen agreement among all who take part in this debate. I will then offer some remarks on the varied objectivity of normative judgments and how this connects to “what matters.” I believe these two topics are more closely related than is often appreciated, for the reasons that count against a strong natural – normative identification also bear upon the how best to understand the objectivity of normative judgments, and why what matters – does.

The collection overall

Two features stand out. First, the essays here very much reflect an increasingly common, and to this reader, unfortunate, way of pursuing philosophy today. The language is often fussy, the framework of analysis needlessly technical. Constructed abbreviations abound. Remarks like “I will introduce the term ‘way of thinking,’ or ‘WOT’” (41); “We label it ‘(O)’ because it is, in H.A. Pritchard’s sense, an objective view of ought.” (111) are,

wearily, everywhere. You would think Parfit had offered the world a thesis in modal logic or a treatise on recent economic trends in the industrialized West rather than, as his title has it, on what matters (in life, presumably). It is not, on the whole, very gratifying reading. There are exceptions, of course, or, passages in some of these essays where this is not so to an oppressive degree. But the reader who hopes for an expansive, elegant, thoughtful essay on what matters, on objectivity, will on the whole be quite disappointed. What we typically get instead are endless remarks about the reciprocal implication relations between near alike sentences and coy reflections on small matters. The following serve as perfectly good illustrations.

“As it stands however this is no argument for the normative status of second personal demands – rather it seems to presuppose it: given that we do make normatively authoritative demands, we must already be in the appropriate relationship. And there is a further difficulty. In the unlikely case above, in which I am treading on one stranger’s foot to prevent others from treading on further strangers’ feet, why does my “relationship” with the first stranger take precedence over my “relationships” with those strangers whose feet I am protecting? Given Darwall’s emphasis above on the demand that the treader “stop *causing* you pain,” perhaps the idea is that it is the direct causal nature of my relationship to the pain of the stranger on whose foot I am treading that accounts for this. But of course, we need to be told what counts as direct causation and why it makes a difference.”

David McNaughton and Piers Rawling, “Normativity, Reasons and Wrongness,” (110)

“The assumption we have suggested that Parfit seems to need in order for the non-normativity of (Q) [the claim that “what is best” will have natural properties too] and sentences like it to pose a problem for the NAN [non-analytic naturalist] is the assumption that the only way the proposition (Q) expresses could explain the informativeness of C [the act which maximizes happiness is what we ought to do] is by being the same proposition (C) expresses. This would mean that (C), despite appearances, doesn’t express a normative proposition, as the NAN requires. But, as we shall argue, there are reasons quite independent of what is at issue between the NAN and the non-naturalist for rejecting this assumption. If we allow that (Q) semantically expresses the proposition that (C) may be used to pragmatically communicate, then we may explain the informativeness of a use of (C) with (Q), while allowing that the proposition (C) expresses in virtue of its semantics is a normative proposition for just the reason Parfit allows: it is stated using a piece of normative vocabulary – namely NORM.”

J.L. Dowell and David Sobel, “Advice for Non-Analytic Naturalists,” (161)

One reads these passages and thinks: Aha! So *this* is what matters.

Secondly, on the other side of the ledger as it were, as I mentioned earlier, this collection includes responses by Parfit to each of the essays. Unsurprisingly, Parfit is more intrigued by what some of these writers have to say about his work than by others, and his responses – in detail and in care – vary a lot. Before Philip Stratton-Lake on what is called “the buck passing account of value” for example, he has literally nothing to say, writing only that he is “convinced by all the arguments.” But that is the rare case. On the whole, having Parfit’s comments on the paper as well as the paper itself makes this a far better book than it would be otherwise. Sometimes Parfit does little more than explain why he thinks his critic gets him wrong (valuable in its way, to be sure). But sometimes there is genuine give and take in the commentary (see his response to David Copp and Julia Markovitz for example), and the reader gets a richer, more expanded sense of the issue in question as a result.

The essays

And now, a few moderately summary remarks about some of the essays themselves.

In the opening essay, “Reflections on Wolf and Wood,” Simon Kirchin takes up not Parfit, but the criticisms Susan Wolf and Allen Wood made of Parfit when *On What Matters* first came out. That Kirchin is summarizing and commenting on previous commentary gives this essay a particularly detached and lifeless air. For example, we get a recapitulation of Wolf’s worries about incommensurability, sort of, in Kirchin’s words, but not much original discussion of the subject itself. To be told that value incommensurability is “seemingly real” and as such “makes trouble for Parfit” is not to be told very much. (17) And Parfit, for his part, really seems to think the idea of incommensurability can be captured in ideas like *indeterminacy* or *imprecision* (189 – 190). Since *these* are ideas he has *long* acknowledged to be a part of the moral landscape, he cannot for the life of him see what the problem for his view might be (he is “puzzled”). Apart from discovering how constrained a conception of value incommensurability Parfit has, understanding it as he does within a consequentialist conception that already denies it, as it were, there is little to be found here.

In “On What It Is To Matter” Julia Markovitz takes up Parfit’s “objectivism” regarding reasons and his rejection of a subjectivist analysis of how something comes to be a reason – roughly, simply in virtue of a desire we happen to have. (55) This is a much vexed topic, with many offshoots, and on the whole Markovitz’s handles the subject, and the objectivist/subjectivist debate, with admirable clarity. Markovitz points out that while

Parfit is often conciliatory in *On What Matters*, seeking common ground among apparently opposing theories, in his view of reasons, Parfit finds his opponent's position wholly unsatisfactory, close to a kind of nihilism (a criticism we will see again, with respect to a certain view of normative-natural identity). On the objectivist picture (Parfit writes), "goodness would give us reasons 'because it is out there, shining down.'" But if subjectivism is true, "we must make our choices in the dark." (55) Since according to subjectivism, all our reasons depend on desires we can in turn have no reason to have, subjectivism entails a nihilistic picture of the normative world, whether its proponents see it that way or not. (55)

As Markovitz quite rightly points out, the disagreement between objectivists and subjectivists is not about "what matters"; it is rather about what it is *for* something to matter. According to subjectivists, things matter because they matter *to us*. Sentient creatures introduce reasons into the world by caring. We find it bad to die an early death; this is something we very much want to avoid. According to the objectivist, things matter to us, when we are reasoning well, *because they matter*. People want to avoid an early death because such death is a bad thing. (58)

To take up this issue is to walk down a very familiar road. Indeed, the reader cannot help but be struck by how much the discussion framework remains as it was when Bernard Williams first offered his anti-objectivist reading of reasons nearly fifty years ago. And most of the familiar considerations are taken up. Desires, and so reasons, can arise, or emerge, simply from reasoning *about* one's present desires. Some desires may be desires we have no reason to have. We may have reasons we are not aware of; conversely, we may act on what we think are reasons, but in fact fail to be reasons at all. Markovitz goes over all this territory patiently, at every point trying to show the subjectivist is not really in so bad a position as Parfit thinks (61 – 69), and on the whole, she gives credible pushback, a good account of things from the subjectivist point of view. However, what is to me the most worthwhile point is not developed, not pursued, nearly as much I would have wished. Markovitz notes that objectivists like Parfit offer a rather surprising story of what it is for a reason to be objective when we act just to satisfy some desire. Anxious to say our reasons are always grounded in facts independent of desires, the objectivist will say that we have desire-based reasons (like wanting a drink when thirsty) only because we have a more fundamental reason that is desire-independent: a reason to promote our well being, or provide pleasure, or avoid frustration, and so forth (60). (Scanlon, a similar objectivist about reasons, says more or less exactly the same thing in his *Being Realistic About Reasons*.) It is *the fact of our liking so and so* that gives us the reason, to do it or to have it; the desire is not the reason, rather it responds to this objective fact, or tracks it, and objectivism is saved.

Markovitz notes the idiosyncrasy of the position. After all, it is the actual experience of liking this stuff rather than that that “fills in” the general fact that I have reason to do what I like with a reason to do this act rather than that, in a particular case. (60) So: maybe I do have reason to eat chocolate because of “the fact that” it will satisfy a desire I presently have. But that it is *chocolate* I want, or have a reason to grasp, can only be because of my contingent subjective predilections. The mild artificiality of the position noted, she then moves on. What has *not* been noticed is that one very important idea behind the objectivist project in the normative context has been given up in order to have a more formal, less substantive, conception of objectivism instead. I will explain.

Let me elaborate on this by introducing an argument of my own. Recall Thomas Nagel’s very early, and very important, contribution to this debate in *The Possibility of Altruism*, where he argued persuasively that one had a reason to act on behalf of one’s future self regardless of how one felt, subjectively, about that future self. The reality of that future self was sufficient to give one a reason. If I am to be in Antarctica in a few days, I have a reason to get a good parka now, regardless of how I feel. Analogously Nagel thought we had reason to take the well being of others into account regardless of how we felt, subjectively, simply because others were equally real. It is not important that we *assess* this argument. The main point here is: “objectivity” of reasons here meant indifference to subjective states. You have a reason not to hurt another regardless of your subjective state. Or we can put it this way: *regardless* of any counter-factual concerning that subjective state you like, you still have a reason to take the well being of others into account (if one grants this argument). Now, however, before the act that satisfies a desire, the objectivist (perhaps “so-called objectivist” is more like it) can say nothing of the sort. I have a reason to eat ice cream (or smoke marijuana) only if I have the desire to do so, or enjoy it when I have done so. The objectivity is now “grammatical.” There is a description of liking and satisfaction that is presented in the garb of facts – and that is fine, as far as it goes. After all, it is “true that,” it is a fact that, if I want X, then, when I get X, I will be pleased, not be frustrated, have a preference satisfied, whatever. And so it is certainly *possible* to cloak this desire satisfaction story in some kind of fact talk. But now we have simply set aside, or have forgotten, the initial aspiration behind the objectivist argument in the first place. We want to say, centrally in certain moral contexts, that persons have a reason to do X – some specific X – regardless of how they feel. *Now* (in this desire based context) that is impossible. I have no reason at all to eat ice cream unless I enjoy it, or would enjoy it if I were to have it. Giving an “objective” account of *that* desire, or that reason, just covers up what is an important asymmetry. This is not to say objectivism about reasons is *wrong*. I do not think it is at all. It is only to point out that a determination to offer a unified, essentialist account of reasons leads to philosophical artificiality. The reason I have not to hit an innocent pedestrian while driving and my reason to eat ice cream are

not going to admit of the same sort of analysis, not at all. One does, and one does not, survive counter-factuals about the agent's subjective states. I don't think this is a terribly disruptive point to acknowledge. It does mean one must set aside a kind of pointless "essentialism." There is not going some single true account that fits all cases of reasons. It seems very artificial (to me at least) to try and resist this point and I cannot see the philosophical point of doing so. But it is just *this* that is the problem. It is this determination to force the account that is plausible before one's future self, or the well being of others, on to the pure desire based context that causes the difficulty. The objectivist should concede what is so about the reasons that are tied to desires, or certain kinds of desires, and offer a *partial* theory. For it is only *sometimes* true that the reasons we have will have nothing to do with how we feel.

This general point, or problem, as we will see, will come up again. Meta-ethics today is gripped by, or pursued via, a strange and to me wholly unwarranted essentialism. Claims about "the normative" or about "reasons" are offered as true of the whole genus, the whole category, and important differences within the category are ignored. Indeed, whether we really have a stable category to begin with is never taken up, and it is not at all obvious that this can be assumed. After all, it is a familiar platitude to us now that while "art" is a meaningful term, it is unlikely that there are many informative generalizations to be had about the members of this class. I believe it is almost certainly true that the same can be said of "the normative." The justified use of normative talk before things as various as bits of nature, novels, jokes, cooperative social systems, pain, and whiskey (and the list really does go on and on) suggests to me at least that we have something more like a Wittgensteinian "family resemblance" class than one in which the members are linked by some relatively clear set of criteria. At the least, I think it is striking fact about contemporary meta-ethics that this threshold issue is *never taken up*, (and I mean: never taken up), something that would have been unimaginable in an earlier philosophical era. I will return to this point, to this challenge, later, when discussing the normative and the natural. Here, on the issue of reasons, let me just observe, again, that perhaps a great deal of the difficulty, or the antagonism between the objectivist and subjectivist analysis, could disappear if we would just divide the domain of reasons, of what there is to be analyzed, accordingly.

Julia Driver's "Contingency and Constructivism" takes up what is unquestionably an interesting project: can we make sense of "reasons that matter" in a more naturalistic, Humean way than Parfit allows? Before taking this up, she sketches the ways in which we might be motivated to do this to begin with because of the *prima facie* difficulties an approach like Parfit's seems to have. But here, when considering her criticisms, the reader really must to turn to Parfit's response at the same time as well. Parfit is surely right to say his view of irreducibly normative truths does not commit him to any spooky ontology

(232), as Driver suggests (172). And he is also right to resist being tied to understanding such truths in exactly the way we would characterize mathematical claims (232, 233). Parfit points out that just because “he cannot imagine” how some of these claims could possibly be otherwise (the inevitable “torturing people for fun is wrong” is trotted out as a paradigm example), this does not mean he is looking for anything like “bedrock.” Surely he can treat these irreducibly normative, undeniably true, claims as web like, mutually supporting. Why not? But Driver is, as she says, mostly interested in sketching an attractive alternative to Parfit, and so the degree to which her criticisms of Parfit might be casual or off the mark can be acknowledged and set aside.

I always approach arguments like Driver’s with the following thought: if as a Humean, you really are going to try to show how morality could be *constructed*, the Kantian constructivist argument would clearly seem to be the one to beat. By assuming the equality of persons, and thinking of parties in a position of fairness attempting to reach agreement, the Kantian has a nice clear way to explain: 1) why we would wind up with the particular rules we would wind up with, and 2) why those rules would have authority, or, admit of a good justification. But OK, that is the Kantian version; let’s have an open mind. Let’s see how the Humean can do this too, relying not on claims about persons and reasonable agreement, but instead on sentiments.

However, when Driver lays out her Humean constructivism, there is just too much easy going vagueness. There is no account of how the Humean picture would generate specific moral content distinct from our starting points, or claim authority for whatever judgments we do wind up with. We are told that while judgments of vice and virtue “are not picking up on anything out there in the world” (of course), at the same time, “our sentiments cannot regulate just willy nilly” (178). Somehow, we are able to correct our biases, we “abstract away” from our “idiosyncratic features of personality,” (is this something we learn to do in yoga?) not (again, of course) by reference to any objective considerations we can point to apart from our affective reactions, but out of a need “to effectively communicate with one another” (179). It is the need for social intercourse that forces us all into a kind of *linga franca*, that nudges us away from the distinctive limitations of our own particular point of view. Through social intercourse, we are able to reach “calm judgments concerning the character of men” (the language here is Hume’s) (179)

As I say, what the content of these judgments should *be* is never taken up. It is not even noticed that this *should* be taken up. There is all the usual talk of “correcting biases” from the standpoint of an “ideal agent,” but we never get our hands dirty with what the unbiased response would *find*, or *feel*, or *detect*, or what have you. So, to give some examples: do we “find that,” when looking at one another in this “unbiased” way, that property is rightly subject to taxation so the poor may have something closer to equal opportunity?

Do we “find that” women have the right to vote? Do we “find that” some spheres of freedom will be respected even if abrogating them would promote more utility? There is talk – there always is – of “properly reflecting” on the quality of one’s mental states (181) and how certain desires (in this case, Caligula’s) “cannot withstand endorsement of the right sort” (181), but the coy, suggestive talk never goes any further; we never get a *theory* of what it would be to do this right, or not, to endorse correctly, or not. It is as if we could do moral philosophy by staying forever on the level of first order talk, the language of etiquette, of what is and is not “done.” But that just will not do, you see. We need to know more, and we need to know *why*.

I turn finally to David Copp’s “Normative Naturalism and Normative Nihilism: Parfit’s dilemma for naturalism.” This is I think one of the better essays in the collection. It is certainly one of the more straightforward, and it has the further virtue of being tied to an issue of undeniable centrality. One of Parfit’s signature claims in *On What Matters* is that naturalism about the normative is fundamentally self defeating as it were; we cannot really affirm there is *value*, if we think of value as a (mere) natural property. Copp thinks this argument is important – the naturalist must meet it – but it is too quick. The naturalist can be a naturalist and still make sense of the evaluative; we just need to make a few helpful philosophical distinctions in how we think, and how we talk, in order to do so.

First a bit more on why Parfit thinks this about naturalism to begin with. Parfit begins by distinguishing between what he calls “hard naturalism” and “soft”: hard naturalism is a kind of eliminativism; of course there are normative *concepts*, but there are no normative properties or states of affairs, only natural ones. Thus we have no reason to use normative language in making normative claims; all such claims can be made with natural language. A “soft naturalist” holds while we *could* use only natural language in talking about what there is in the world, we “have good reason” all the same to use normative language. But Parfit thinks this second claim, the position of the soft naturalist, is fundamentally unstable. There “can be good reason” to use such language only if there are facts that cannot be expressed in natural language. And it is precisely this that naturalism must deny. So, soft naturalism too must also be a kind of eliminativism. In any event, it cannot really hold onto the intuition (the intuition that is in fact correct) that there *is* good reason to use normative talk. Hence Parfit’s famous claim “naturalism is close to nihilism.” As Copp puts it, on Parfit’s view, the naturalist must hold that normative concepts could be removed “without cognitive loss.” (30) And that is to say, the naturalist must hold there is no normative at all, that normativity “is an illusion.” (28)

Neither Copp nor Parfit put it this way, but I think it is helpful to frame this as a dilemma framed around the question of autonomy. Do normative concepts name a domain that is autonomous with respect to natural facts? If they do, if the normative is autonomous

with respect to the natural, then, if naturalism is understood as a denial of that claim, naturalism, or this strand of the argument, cannot be right. If the normative is *not* autonomous with respect to the natural, then it must be swallowed up by it, and then it must also be true that normativity does not really exist. Like “the religious” on some views, what was once solid melts into air, when touched by naturalistic analysis.

For Copp, the right approach is what he calls a “bold” rather than “eliminativist” strategy (32). Here we affirm the existence of normative properties – we do not *deny* “the normative” – but hold “all normative properties are [also] natural properties.” (32) However, obviously, for this strategy to work, the naturalist must be able to say what it is for a property to *be* “normative,” what a normative property *is*. Otherwise the naturalist can’t begin to say how, in addition, *that* property is (also) natural. And now things get more interesting than either Copp or Parfit seem to realize. Copp offers a conception of “normativity” that is in fact wildly selective and, even its own domain, artificial and incomplete – and seems not to notice any of this. Normative facts Copp says are “grounded in” “solutions” to certain “generic problems” faced by “human beings” in “their ordinary lives.” (32-33) So, for example, there is the problem of social cooperation. We do better if we can live together, and plainly “widespread subscription to a moral code” can help us do just that. Thus, “morality is the solution to the problem of equipping people to live comfortably and successfully together in societies.” (33) “Moral truth” is a function of whatever “system of norms ... would do most to ameliorate the relevant problem of normative governance.”

A few points of comment before returning to this fantasy land. In the first place, it seems obvious that much normative life has absolutely nothing to do with any of this whatsoever. It is an interesting, and on the whole depressing, feature both of Parfit and his many commentators that, while claiming to offer a treatise on “the normative” as such, in fact, we get nothing of the kind. Oh, we get a lot of discussion of “the badness of pain” (necessary, to be sure, and so true in all possible worlds) and a little about how “torturing people for fun is wrong” (I will have more to say about both of these so called normative claims below), but there is absolutely nothing about aesthetic or literary or other cultural accomplishments. When I call De Kooning “original” or Lenny Bruce “witty” or the Waldstein “expressive” or Henry James “imaginative” surely I am expressing a normative judgment. Surely these are central cases of “the normative.” But if that is so, you would never know it from the literature that is out there. And the aesthetic case is important when thinking about “the normative” for several reasons actually. First, it is an interesting case where our emotional life is often *undeniably* centrally implicated. It is hard to see how the objects I have mentioned here would have the resonance that they do for us, and so bear the ascriptions I have offered, if we did not have the emotional engagement with these objects that we do. Second, connected to this last point, while objectivity is avail-

able, to some extent, maybe, the aesthetic also offers a rich warning to those who would assume well justified judgments cannot be challenged, that there will not be deep and enduring “sensitivity-relativity” all the same. And finally, the aesthetic also offers a case where it is often very tricky, usually just plain foolhardy, to offer a pre-existing teleology and then point to the evaluated object (the art object) as good because it offers a “solution” to the well defined problem posed by that teleology. *That’s* not what makes *Madam Bovary* a better novel than *A Tale of Two Cities*. And yet, and yet, these undeniable points not withstanding, we have in this idea of “the solution” to certain “generic” problems of “human cooperation” *the* normative. Truly, meta-ethics is in an unbelievable state.

But wait, there’s more. Even if we forget how selective a theory this is, how much is left out or willfully ignored, even if we stay only within the specific domain it speaks to, it is woefully under described. So, these “humans” Copp waves at so vaguely: are they to be considered equally entitled to consideration, regardless of gender or race or property ownership? If so, surely this is not the natural or default posture of societies (of “humans”) in the past. We need a *theory* (of persons, of citizenship) telling us what counts and why. Is apartheid a “solution” to the problem of living together? Many Afrikaners thought so. Must women have the vote? (That tiresome example again.) Do same sex couples have the right to marry? The answers to these questions hardly follow from some bland talk about “social cooperation” and “generic human need.” It is obvious that similar points can be made about normative assessments of e.g. abortion, or affirmative action, or libertarian conceptions of equal opportunity. The various answers on offer here are *all* compatible with “social cooperation” – clearly, since stable societies have embraced all possible positions with respect to these matters. From that it hardly follows they are all, normatively, on a par.

All right, now we are back. Now the subject before us, again, is whether the naturalist can be a naturalist and not fall afoul of the wrong sort of eliminativism. First, Copp meets the right threshold requirement: he has said (allegedly) what the normative is; a circle has been drawn around it. Now, we distinguish between “worldly facts” and “propositional facts.” When I say “water is H₂O” I refer to the same fact in the world (or worldly fact) twice over. But “water is water” and “water is H₂O” name different propositions. All the naturalist has to do to meet the eliminativist worry is to insist that there will be “different ways” of thinking about a normative state of affairs, or, what is the same thing, different propositions picking it out. As a result, there *will* be non-natural normative properties in this propositional rather than worldly way. So, even if “wrongness” (a normative property) is always and everywhere identical to “undermining the general welfare” (a natural one) in a “worldly” way (these sentences always and everywhere pick out the same worldly fact) clearly, a person could *believe* an action is wrong without believing that action will undermine the general welfare, and vice-versa. (35) Thus we can make sense

of strong identity between the natural and the normative, and, at the same time, how it is that the disappearance of the normative would constitute (to use Copp's strange term) a "cognitive loss." Belief that "this act is *wrong*" is not the same, does not pick out the same "propositional fact," as the belief that "this act diminishes the general welfare." Identity and yet autonomy are together delivered – where it is the latter that guarantees that the naturalist is no "nihilist" after all.

When we turn to Parfit's response, it turns out these two have nothing to fight about after all. The *only* naturalist that Parfit thinks courts nihilism is one who thinks there are *no* non natural normative facts. But, Parfit shrewdly observes, this cannot be Copp's view. Once we understand "fact" in this more relaxed way to include propositional facts, "facts" which raise no ontological difficulty, it is clear Copp *must* hold there are non-natural normative facts. (198-199) What else could be the objects of our (autonomous) normative beliefs? What else could we be picking out when using these propositions? Amazingly, it turns out that so long as one thinks this talk of propositional facts carries any philosophical weight, conceptual non identity will be enough to give us all the nihilism-resisting platitudes regarding naturalism and reduction we could wish.

My own view is that more interesting issues lie just beyond this framework. Let me begin by noting that nowhere in this discussion do we see the question of normative/natural identity taken up via the type/token distinction. This may seem a bit of philistinism on my part. After all, if Copp and Parfit are going to *assume* the possibility of type-type identity (between e.g. "wrong" and "undermining the general welfare"), and *still* find a domain of non-natural normative facts, doesn't that make the weaker mere token identity irrelevant? I do not think so at all. It is the implausibility of type identity that *explains why* there would be "cognitive loss" were we to jettison the normative. Parfit, and Copp, may think that by imagining "worldly" identity as type – type, what survives under that analysis as "normatively independent" will have all the autonomy one could ask for. But I think this is very much not so. This domain of propositional facts, this talk of "cognitive loss," is consistent with a very meager conception of the normative, or with anything else for that matter.

Consider the counterpart point when recast in the context of belief in supernatural spirits (let us assume such belief is widespread, that all the world is Haiti). So suppose that 1) someone believes that the spirit Ahura has put a curse on her, and 2) "Ahura" is in fact strongly type – type identical with a neural state N that is typically, reliably, induced by the local shaman. The spiritual S is the natural N in terms of worldly facts, but so what? We would, given the independence of propositional facts, still have, consistent with this identity claim, a realm of autonomous non natural spiritual facts. For surely, if those who spoke of "Ahura's wrath" were forced to employ the natural kind term instead, there

would be “cognitive loss.” But what in Heaven’s name can *that* show? Not that there is any “Ahura fact”! Except of course in this pointless or trivial sense of propositional fact. These distinctions of ontological kind, or between that which has causal-ontological implications and that which does not, show nothing about the character of the particular domain before us; in particular, it can show nothing about whether the *use* of any such autonomous concepts is *justified*. It is not enough, it cannot be enough, to show some conceptual scheme picks out its own counterpart “autonomous” facts, facts, when realized in the world, are invariably coextensive with some “worldly” or natural fact. We get that much in the vengeful spirits case. We must ask whether the use and deployment of this conceptual scheme, or some part of it, is *justified*. And here, before this question of justification, whether or not type-type identity is plausible is of the first importance, because the reasons why such identity is *not* plausible are crucial to getting the normative right, to why the sort of skepticism appropriate before a Voodoo god can get no foothold here. Obviously, the *justification* for my claim that Henry James is insightful can never lie in offering a natural description. I am not making a natural causation or “supervenience” claim. If that is so, then any talk of type-type identity cannot be right. The autonomy of the normative lies in the distinctive *use* of normative language. Typically, we use normative language not to pick out some “property,” but to point to some accomplishment.

I now return to the earlier anti-essentialist complaint. It is a remarkable feature of meta ethics today that it is taken for granted that “the normative” names a more or less stable category before which generalizations are just waiting there for the making. But I am very much not so sure. I am not sure that “original” when said of works of art and “just” when said of the basic structure of society and “good” when said of single malt scotch and the “bad” when said of pain are all helpfully captured in some single rubric, let it be any rubric you like. I for one would not at all mind if we dropped this obsessive essentialism and at least flirted once in a while with talk of “family resemblances.” But setting that aside, I do think it is fair to say of some subgroup of normative concepts that they name, centrally, *accomplishments*. When I say the remark was clever, the novel original, the argument insightful, I say these things managed to achieve some sort of accomplishment. And it seems obvious in these sorts of cases that any sort of type type identity between the accomplishment term and whatever the natural states of affairs that here bears it is ridiculous. How could there possibly be type type identity between “expressive” when applied to art works, or “clever” when applied to architectural designs, and some natural or material predicate? The intent to accomplish or bring about some end can seize on a variety of possible means. Much as I can make a tool with a rock or with a branch, I can make a clever remark about Margaret Thatcher with a variety of different words, or paint a somber seascape using a variety of materially distinct painterly media. Of course every expressive painting is token identical with some material predicate or other. But so

what? No one thinks there is any way into the idea of “the expressive” via the disjunction of whatever token identity claims have also been true with each separate (correct) use of the term. And so, type – type identity between “the normative” (or at least this species of it, that which speaks of accomplishments) and “the natural” is not a plausible thought from the start. These collective interests, as kinds, are autonomous with respect to physical kinds. They name interests that shape the world, (*we make* the expressive painting or the clever remark); they are not things caused by it. This point is so fundamental to what norms *are* that if we treat it casually – “oh let’s just assume there might be type – type identity here and see what the independence of the normative might come to *then*” – we are bound to wind up with a woefully artificial version of the normative when we are finished.

And so it is here. Parfit thinks strict identity must be rejected because it leads to “nihilism.” The normative would “disappear” were we to assimilate it, strictly, to a natural kind. I think this is true, but why not take up *why* it is true? As it stands, Parfit’s argument is unfortunately intuitionist and alarmist. It just *seems that* we would “lose something” if “the normative” were to be “the natural.” His critics, in this collection and elsewhere, jump to the challenge: “oh, don’t worry,” they say “*here* is a way to see the normative as identical to the natural *without* the alarmist consequences.” And Parfit then replies, “ah, but you see, you do *not* see the normative as identical to the natural in every way imaginable; there is propositional distinctness after all.” And that is high meta-ethics today. How strange and misguided all this is! Why not take up the way in which the normative *cannot* be type-type identical with the natural to begin with? Therein lies the clue to the strangeness of the thought experiment. Interests guide us. Intending to bring some interest or accomplishment-norm about, we shape various bits of the world in its light, or in the light of how we best understand the norm in question. (“Was *that* a clever sentence? Maybe not, let’s try it again.”) Parfit – and Copp – get the argument exactly backwards. It is not the “cognitive loss” that would follow from assimilating the normative to the natural that counts against the assimilation. It is rather that this assimilation reflects nothing less than a category mistake. It is like treating a modal concept as an empirical one. Of course there will be “cognitive loss” if we misdescribe the fundamental nature of a thing and then insist on staying faithful to that misdescription! But if we are easy going about the *kind* of identity there can be here, granting the logical possibility of type – type identity from the start, this point will be missed, or, perhaps more accurately, it will fail to guide the inquiry in the right way.

As I say, part of what has gone wrong is a failure to appreciate how rich and varied the normative is, and how strange it would be if there were very much we could say about “the normative,” understood generally, that was both true and informative. And part of what has gone wrong is that a certain very important *category*, or subset, of the norma-

tive just always fails to come up in these discussions. I very much doubt type – type identity between the normative and the natural would be so blithely assumed were the target cases of normative judgment under discussion to be drawn from the aesthetic context. (Just try it.) And the examples that *do* get attention, over and over again, are arguably not really cases of normative judgment in the first place. Perhaps my thought is more accurately expressed in saying it is wrong to put forward such examples as *paradigms* of the normative, and I believe this too, fixating on the wrong examples, also contributes to getting “the normative” wrong. I refer of course to the two ever present standbys in these discussions, “pain is bad” on one hand, “torturing people for fun is wrong” on the other. After a brief discussion of these two examples, and why it may be a mistake to think much can be learned about “the normative” from either of them, I will try to say a bit more about normative objectivity.

Is “pain is bad” a normative statement? I am not sure it really is. At the least, it is a primitive or degenerate case of such, since I do not think we are using the word “bad” in a context that employs any *judgment*. I think it is fair to say that when we say, when hurt, “that’s bad!” there is no judgment at all. “Bad,” here, is just a way saying how it feels when we are injured or damaged, what the qualia is *like*. It is a *report*, not an assessment or a judgment, and means simply “unpleasant” “better avoided” and so forth. By contrast, when I say “*The Ambassadors* is insightful” I am making a very different sort of claim entirely – here I do make a judgment, reach a verdict about an object I can pick out apart from that assessment. I refer to an accomplishment-kind, and also claim that this object bears it. It is assumed, rightly, that in offering this judgment, I am also prepared to offer some sort of justification story. Similarly with respect to normative political claims. When I say “some redistribution of wealth is just” I offer a judgment that I am prepared to justify (in this case, perhaps by appealing to a reasonable conception of political equality). But by contrast, since I think we are simply *reporting an unpleasant sensation* when saying “pain is bad,” I am disinclined to call this an example of the *normative*. The badness of pain may be *raw material* for the normative, to be sure – and it is, famously, under utilitarianism. When utilitarians say we ought to bring about the best net aggregate of welfare, they are using the unpleasantness of pain as part of the raw material for their normative theory (the commitment to egalitarianism is the other central component). But the *report* of pain, or its so called “badness” is not *normative* at all. Just because we use the same *word* we might use when speaking of James Levine’s conducting (“Did you hear him last night? It was really bad.”) hardly means its use *here* expresses a “normative judgment.”

When Parfit says he cannot imagine how the claim “torturing people for fun is wrong” could in turn ever be wrong, he is quite right. But why is this? My own view is that there is a lot more mere semantic implication in this remark that is usually appreciated. Note,

we would never have in the simpler remark “torturing people is wrong” anything so unchallengeable. The smarty pants utilitarian might well imagine a case where torturing was justified (smarty pants Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld might too – indeed, might more than imagine it). By adding the “for fun” we already handle that worry – we pick out a certain *sort* of reason with “for fun,” essentially, a whimsical or trivial reason. And here “wrong” means, more or less, “not justified” or “not justifiable.” So, “torturing people for fun is wrong,” is, I think, very close to the following: causing harm must be justified, and if you cause harm for what is acknowledged not to be a good reason, then it follows, *that* cannot be justified. It is a platitude about the conceptual connection between harm and justification, not so far from something like “the innocent should never be punished” which expresses a platitude about the hoped for connection between how we understand “punishment” and “guilt.” It is not a normative judgment. It is certainly not a paradigmatic instance of one.

Obviously, Parfit is a very formidable philosopher. The technical sophistication is dazzling, and, in his own way, he really is a better reader of his critics than many in meta-ethics, more sympathetic and genuinely open to learning from those with whom he disagrees. The comparison with the better known expressivists in this regard goes very much in Parfit’s favor. But for all the sophistication, there is, in Parfit and in his critics, a surprising crudeness in the general treatment we get of the subject at hand. It is striking that a philosophical inquiry into “what matters” or “the normative” would be so indifferent to the constructed world of art objects, and the complicated but very interesting judgments we make when within that world. Truthfully, there is not even very much attention to normative *political* judgments, and the degree to which they may, or may not, require a rich theory to be well justified. It is as if all the work, and controversy, surrounding Rawls’ late “pragmatic” defense of the liberal state had never occurred. Although there is a lot of *talk* about “the normative” and “the natural,” to the extent this relationship is pursued at all in the context of a particular theory, a particular interpretation, it is always utilitarianism. We never get any mention of say Marx, who actually thought very hard about how underlying material conditions might determine, or bear upon, the judgments of law and ideology we make when within a concrete world as moral agents. It is, in short, so *weird*. There is the purported claim to be talking about what matters and the normative, and there is no sensitivity to what even a cursory inspection of this domain reveals. And then, connected to this, but a bit different, since I think it is also influenced by the infatuation with science we see in contemporary philosophy, there is this strange almost a priori commitment to essentialism, to the idea that there really is some single subject here with a single set of philosophical truths to be appended to it. And a certain amount of what is unsatisfactory follows simply from that. One cannot help but ask: *why* must meta-ethicists be such essentialists? What is gained thereby? In

philosophy of mind, it is taken for granted that an analysis of beliefs and thoughts with propositional content on one hand, and an analysis of qualia on the other will probably not at all coincide. Why cannot we see a similar sensitivity to the rather obvious differences of terrain that characterize “the normative” or “what it is to have a reason”? Given this near *a priori* commitment to a unified subject matter, I do not think it is accidental that the examples we see over and over in these discussions are the anodyne “the badness of pain” and “the wrongness of torture for fun” – what are in fact merely reports of sensation and rehearsals of semantic connectedness, not cases of real normative judgment at all. If we were to have before us complex aesthetic judgments, or complex political judgments, the way in which these judgments require far more than detection or inspection, and the way in which they are very different from one another, (by which I mean: their justification stories are very different in kind) would be obvious.

So what does matter? Bits of the world matter to us in different ways, and for different reasons. It is not important that I find the state I live in to be “self expressive.” Instead, it simply needs to be a bit more than minimally just. By contrast, it *is* important that my writing, or teaching, reflect the particular things that I think – quite personally, or idiosyncratically – are most worthwhile. The novels I respect and the music that I return to again and again must have certain qualities, but I do not think that “what SR respects” or “what SR returns to” on one hand and “what makes for a good novel” or “good music” are coextensive. Before some things – people, relationships, art objects, nature – it is hard to imagine such things “mattering” without also bringing in our emotional engagement, typically (but not always, as the case of nature shows) guided by judgment. In other cases, reference to a teleology does the trick. The state must advance certain ends, it must treat its citizens with equal concern and respect. That *matters*. But I see no need to posit some emotional engagement to the object of this thought.

Philosophy currently stands at a very interesting and for some of us, exasperating, point. Its practitioners have never been more sophisticated, and philosophical writing has never been more subtle. At the same time, there is a strange lack of interest in, and so little exploration of, what there is in the world *apart from* philosophy that intrigues us, or puzzles us. So long as that remains so, works with titles like “On What Matters” will always be at least partially misleading.