

CRITICAL NOTICES

What Matters in Metaethics

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1. Introduction

In the first two volumes of *On What Matters*,¹ Derek Parfit pursued a conciliatory project in normative ethics, which sought to dissolve the disagreement between the most plausible versions of Kantianism, contractualism and rule consequentialism. Parfit was less conciliatory in his meta-ethics, however. He did not shy away from declaring himself in deep disagreement with most metaethicists of the 20th century, with the exceptions of Henry Sidgwick, Thomas Nagel, Tim Scanlon and possibly only a few others. Indeed, Parfit would sometimes go as far as to say that he and some other influential metaethicists did not even speak about the same topic.

The third volume of *On What Matters*, which sadly turned out to be Parfit's last published book, is an extended response to the critical essays in Peter Singer's edited collection *Does Anything Really Matter?*, all of which focus on metaethical theses defended in the first two volumes. In *On What Matters* vol. 3, Parfit embarks on a project of the conciliatory kind that he previously pursued in normative ethics. In particular, he now aspires to offer a kind of synthesis of non-reductive naturalism à la Railton, expressivism à la Gibbard, and the kind of ontologically light-weight non-naturalistic realism that he defended in the previous volumes, and which there went by the name 'non-metaphysical cognitivism'.

Parfit also finishes off the project he started in volume 1, that of trying to unify first-order moral theories. In volume 3, the candidates for unification are not principle-based moralities, such as Kantianism, contractualism and rule consequentialism, but act-based moralities; more specifically, common-sense morality, deontology and act consequentialism. However, in our review, we will focus exclusively on Parfit's metaethical discussion.

Does Parfit's conciliatory project in metaethics succeed? We shall begin to address this question in the next section by, first, trying to get a grip on Parfit's position, which now goes by the name 'non-realist cognitivism', and, second, by examining his account of properties, and of normative properties in particular. We shall then examine whether Parfit's triviality objection is effective against Jackson's brand of naturalism. Finally, we will ask whether Parfit is right to think that his favoured metaethical view converges with what he thinks are the most plausible forms of naturalism and quasi-realism, illustrated by Railton's view and Gibbard's view, respectively.

1 *Does Anything Really Matter? Essays on Parfit on Objectivity*, edited by Peter Singer. Oxford University Press, 2017 xvi + 300 pp., and *On What Matters*, Volume 3, by Derek Parfit. Oxford University Press, 2017. xiv + 468 pp.

It should be noted that Railton and Gibbard are not just referred to in Parfit's discussion, but also are allowed to speak for themselves. Their replies to Parfit are included in the volume, which makes the book read like a report from an ongoing discussion between some of the leading metaethical thinkers of today.

2. Parfit's non-realist cognitivism

Parfit distinguishes between two senses of 'normativity': the 'rule-implying' sense and the 'reason-implying' sense. Examples of normative truths of the former kind are truths about law, etiquette and grammar. These truths are all natural, in that they can be explained in naturalistic terms (57).² Normative truths of the latter kind concern what we have reasons to do, and such truths are neither explainable in naturalistic terms, nor empirically discoverable (60). Parfit defends *non-realist cognitivism* about normativity in the reason-implying sense. (Henceforth when we use the term 'normative' and its cognates, we have in mind Parfit's reason-implying sense.) This view is *cognitivist* in that it holds that some normative claims are true; it is *non-realist* in that it holds that true normative claims have no ontological implications. What this means is far from perfectly clear, unfortunately. Parfit elaborates only by denying some claims that he takes proponents of other views to make. In particular, he takes 'metaphysical non-naturalists' to hold that normative properties exist in some 'non-spatio-temporal part of reality, . . . a *Platonic realm*', and that normative claims are 'made to be true by being correct descriptions of how things are, not in the natural world, but in some other part of reality' (59). He takes naturalists to find such claims mysterious and to hold that normative properties are parts of the causal nexus. Like metaphysical non-naturalism and naturalism, non-realist cognitivism is not *anti-realist*, since it holds that there are normative properties. Unlike the two other kinds of views, however, non-realist cognitivism holds that normative properties are not 'ontologically weighty': they exist neither in the natural world, nor in some non-spatio-temporal part of reality, and they lack causal efficacy.

This package of intriguing claims raises a lot of questions. Alas, however, Parfit does disappointingly little to answer them. He characterizes non-realistic cognitivism negatively and he brings up the worry that he has not explained what he means by phrases such as 'ontologically weighty' and 'some part of reality' (60). His response is the following: 'I use these phrases when describing views that I don't accept, and one of my objections to these views is the obscurity of their ontological claims' (60).

But this will not do. Parfit does not merely *not accept* the view that normative properties are ontologically weighty and exist in some part of reality; he *accepts* the view that normative properties *do not have* these features, and he characterizes his own view in these negative terms. Non-realist cognitivists, says Parfit, '*deny* that normative claims have any such ontological implications' (60, emphasis added). We therefore need to know exactly what non-realist cognitivists mean by phrases such as 'ontologically weighty' and 'some part of reality' before we can understand and properly assess their view. Compare the case of atheism: Unlike agnostics, atheists do not merely not accept theists' view that God exists; atheists *accept* the view that God does

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all bracketed page references are to Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, Volume 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

not exist. In order to understand and assess atheists' position, we need first to know what they mean by 'God' (and 'exists'). An atheist cannot get away with simply saying 'I do not have to explain what I mean by "God"', because I use this term when describing views that I do not accept'.

Some light can perhaps be thrown on Parfit's view of normative properties by considering his use of the word 'property'. Parfit explains that he uses the word in its 'wide, non-legal sense in which any claim about something can be restated as a claim about this thing's properties' (66). So, the claim *that x has the property of being F* adds nothing to the content of the claim *that x is F*. Parfit follows other philosophers in calling this sense of 'property' *pleonastic*.

Parfit also recognizes other senses of the word 'property'. It is not only that he recognizes that there are philosophers who reject the pleonastic view; he seems to hold that the word 'property' (in its non-legal sense) is ambiguous. In addition to the pleonastic sense, there is a 'narrower, ontologically weighty sense', and there is 'one such clear and useful sense [in which] properties are the features of concrete objects or events which can have causal effects' (68). Being luminous is one of Parfit's examples of an ontologically weighty property, but he insists that there are no ontologically weighty normative properties. Since Parfit claims that both naturalists and metaphysical non-naturalists accept the view that normative properties are ontologically weighty, we take Parfit to hold that there are at least two ways for a property to be ontologically weighty: one is to be causally efficacious, another is to exist in some non-spatio-temporal, or Platonic, realm of reality.

Finally, there is the 'necessarily co-extensional' sense of 'property', according to which two properties are identical if they are necessarily co-extensional. If it were true, for example, that an act is right if and only if it minimizes suffering, rightness and minimizing suffering would be identical properties in the necessarily co-extensional sense (131–32), but they would not be the same in the pleonastic sense, which Parfit takes to be 'more informative' (69). Parfit thus appears to agree with Frank Jackson that normative properties are identical to whichever naturalistic properties they necessarily supervene on, in the necessarily co-extensional sense of 'property' (*Does Anything Really Matter?* 198, 201–5). This suggests that Parfit's disagreement with reductive naturalists like Jackson boils down to a controversy about whether there are other senses of 'property', in addition to the necessarily co-extensional sense; for example, a pleonastic sense (129).

Parfit's discussion is further complicated by the fact that he also holds that properties in his favoured sense are 'description-fitting', in that they 'fit the descriptive words or phrases with which we refer to them' (66). However, he also holds that some normative concepts, like that of *a normative reason*, are indefinable and do not describe properties (73). Presumably, the thought is that we can only define the concept of a normative reason ostensively. This suggests that only some pleonastic properties are description-fitting, and at least one of Parfit's formulations allows for this interpretation (66). But there are several other passages in which Parfit appears to treat 'pleonastic' and 'description-fitting' as interchangeable terms (as applied to properties) (see, e.g., 99, 132, 228; this seems also to be in line with Peter Railton's understanding of these terms in his commentary, see 116–17). This makes it difficult to see exactly what Parfit's description-fitting sense of 'property' is.

Bracketing the question of whether there is perfect overlap between pleonastic and description-fitting properties, we could get a better grip on Parfit's favoured properties if

we knew how to individuate them. Unfortunately, what Parfit tells us about individuation is not especially helpful. This is brought out by his discussion of the properties of *being an equiangular triangle* and *being an equilateral triangle*. These properties are familiar to contemporary metaethicists, since several non-reductive realists have recently argued that they constitute a counterexample to the thesis that necessarily co-extensional properties are identical. Necessarily, something is an equiangular triangle iff it is an equilateral triangle, but intuitively these properties are not identical, the thought is. Reductive naturalists, like Jackson, respond that necessarily, for an object to be an equiangular triangle and to be an equilateral triangle is for that object to have one and the same shape, so there is only one property here; not two distinct ones (*Does Anything Really Matter?* 202). Parfit agrees with Jackson here and holds that the two properties are the same in the description-fitting sense. This is because the concept of an equiangular triangle and the concept of an equilateral triangle ‘can be plausibly claimed to describe, and thereby refer to, the same shape’ (130).

However, being an equiangular triangle (i.e., being a triangle with two equal angles) does not seem to fit the description of being an equilateral triangle (i.e., being a triangle with two equal sides). If Parfit were to insist that it does, it is not clear that this would be consistent with what he says about another pair of necessarily co-extensional properties, namely, the property of *being the only even prime* and the property of *being the positive square root of 4*. Parfit is adamant that these two properties are not identical. But why? To paraphrase Parfit, the concept of being the only even prime and the concept of being the positive square root of 4 can be plausibly claimed to describe, and thereby refer to, the same identificational property, being identical to the number 2. This line of reasoning seems analogous with what Parfit says about the properties of being an equiangular triangle and being an equilateral triangle. Just as there are not two shapes – equiangular and equilateral – but only two ways of characterizing the same shape, there are not two identificational properties – being identical to the only even prime and being identical to the positive square root of 4 – but only two ways of characterizing the same identificational property – being identical to the number 2. There thus seems to be a tension in Parfit’s own favoured account of properties.

Indeed, one could take a step back and ask why Parfit thinks, in the first place, that there is a substantive question about the identity criteria for pleonastic properties. As Stephen Schiffer, who coined the term ‘pleonastic property’, points out (Schiffer 2003), and as Gibbard concurs in his comments on Parfit’s reply (214), since the notion of a pleonastic property is explained by saying that the claim that x has the property of being F adds nothing to the claim that x is F , this notion of a property does not settle when two such properties are identical. As seen, Parfit’s additional claim that these properties are ‘descriptive-fitting’ does not help much when it comes to finding clear identity criteria.

The upshot of this discussion is that it is not clear that Parfit has managed to carve out a clearly defined space for his non-realist version of non-naturalism. But his conciliatory project presupposes that there is such a version of non-naturalism. After all, his conciliatory move is to offer naturalists and quasi-realists his favoured ontologically light-weight normative property that he thinks they can accept without taking on any extra ontological burdens. So, until we get a firmer grip on this property we cannot determine whether his project is successful.

3. *Naturalism and Parfit's Triviality Objection*

In *On What Matters* vol. 2, Parfit presented an argument against naturalism, which he labelled the *Triviality Objection*. In a nutshell, the argument is this: Suppose that *rightness* is identical to naturalistic property N. If so, the normative claim that whatever is N is right would be trivial, since it amounts to the claim that whatever is N is N. But the normative claim is not trivial. Rather it helps us to 'make good decisions and to act well', since it provides 'positive substantive normative information' (84). So, *rightness* is not identical to any N.

Parfit thinks that this argument applies to both *hard naturalism*, according to which we need not use normative concepts to make normative claims, and to *soft naturalism*, according to which we need to use normative concepts in order to make normative claims that 'help us to make good decisions and to act well' (84–85).

Jackson, a self-proclaimed hard naturalist, has replied to this argument by pointing out that, on his 'network analysis' of *rightness*, it is not obvious that a certain natural property N is identical to *rightness* (*Does Anything Really Matter?*, 206–11). According to Jackson's network analysis, we start by collecting all general claims about *rightness* that are self-evident or a priori – for example, that what is right is what we would be motivated to do if we were rational and not weak-willed, and that what is right is what is in accord with norms that are universalizable, impartial, and that could not be reasonably rejected. We then look for a natural property that satisfies these general claims that make up the 'job description' for *rightness*.

On one version of this view, the *realizer* view, it is a priori that *rightness* = the property that satisfies the job description. So, on this view, if we find out that the natural property N satisfies the job description, then we know that *rightness* = N. This identification is not obvious, since it takes a lot of reflection to find out whether a property satisfies all the claims in the job description for *rightness*. On another version of this view, the *role property* view, it is a priori that *rightness* is identical, not to the realizer property, but to the role property; the property of having a property that satisfies the job description for *rightness*. When we have found a property that satisfies the job description, we have found a property that *realizes* *rightness* but need not be identical to *rightness*. According to Jackson, whether the property is identical to *rightness* depends on whether it *necessarily* realizes *rightness*. If it does, then the realizer property and the role property are necessarily co-extensive, which, according to Jackson, is sufficient for the properties to be identical (*Does Anything Really Matter?* 207). Again, whether a certain property realizes *rightness* or is identical to *rightness* is no trivial matter, since it depends on whether the property satisfies the job description, and in the case of identity necessarily does so, which are not trivial matters.

Parfit's reply seems to be that the resulting identity claim – that *rightness* = N – is still trivial, because it does not provide 'positive substantive normative information'. To provide 'positive' information, it has to relate *rightness* to some other properties, not just say that the property is identical to itself (85, (343 in *On What Matters*, vol. 2)). To be 'substantive' it must tell us something we did not already know, or convey information that people might (reasonably) disagree about (86, (9, 343 in *On What Matters*, vol. 2)).

Note, however, that the *process* of identification requires positive information about the candidate property for identification, since in order for this property to be successfully identified with *rightness* it must relate in the right way to other

properties, namely, the ones mentioned in the general claims that together make up the job description for rightness: rational motivation, universalizability, impartiality, reasonable rejectability, etc. This information is also substantive, since reasonable people can disagree about exactly which general claims make up this job description. It is unclear why it is not sufficient that the process of identification is non-trivial in Parfit's sense. Furthermore, this identification is helpful if you want to make good choices. After all, if you want guidance about how to make a good decision, it would be most helpful to be told that *N* is the property that satisfies the job description for rightness, for then you know that the available actions that exemplify *N* are the right options for you. Why insist that the resulting identity claim must also be non-trivial?

Even if we were to insist on this, the resulting identity claim that $N = \text{rightness}$ will in fact provide positive information, if 'rightness' means 'the property that satisfies the job description for rightness', which is what some network analysts believe. On this view, to say that $N = \text{rightness}$ is to say that $N = \text{the property that satisfies the job description for rightness: the general claims } C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n$. If *N* satisfies the job description, *N* will be related to the properties that are mentioned in C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n . The identity claim will thus relate *N* to many other properties; it will not merely say that *N* is identical to itself. The identity claim will also provide substantive information, since, again, reasonable people can disagree about which general claims make up the job description for rightness.

For soft naturalists, one natural reaction to the triviality objection is to distinguish between the property *N* and the concepts we use to pick out *N*, or the guises under which we entertain *N*. Even if the claim *that whatever is N is N* is trivial, what this claim describes could have been presented with different concepts or under a different guise. Instead of presenting the property *N* using the concept *N* we could have presented it using the concept *right* and the resulting distinct claim would be *that whatever is N is right*. Now, this assumes that the concept *N* and the concept *right* are different and that the concept *right* is indispensable for making action-guiding normative claims, but this is something Parfit concedes to the soft naturalists, whom he takes to be vulnerable to the triviality objection.

It is not clear what Parfit's response to this move is, or would be. On the one hand, he insists at several places that irreducibly normative claims cannot state natural facts. Since the claim that whatever is *N* is right, or the simpler claim that an action is right, would be an irreducibly normative claim (since the concept *right* cannot be given an analysis in terms of natural concepts), he would deny that this claim states the natural fact that whatever is *N* is *N*, or that the action is *N*.

On the other hand, Parfit also claims that he is in agreement with Railton, who defends a version of soft naturalism that makes use of the move described above. Can Parfit have it both ways? This is what he says to show that there is no longer any disagreement between him and Railton:

Instead of distinguishing between two kinds of properties and facts, Railton distinguishes between two kinds of conceptual role. But as Railton also writes, irreducibly normative concepts have distinctive analytical entailments, and can be used to convey distinctive information. This information would be about distinctively normative non-ontological properties and truths, or facts. (101–2)

Railton's reply (which Parfit seems to take on board), echoes this diagnosis. Railton also adds that Parfit and he could be seen as having 'different preferred dialects' (113) that are intertranslatable in the sense that 'when Parfit would speak of a "non-ontological fact"', Railton would speak of a 'true, positive claim or proposition essentially involving a normative, non-natural concept' (116).

So, it seems that when it is true that whatever is N is right, or that a certain action is right, Parfit would describe this as an irreducibly normative fact which involves a normative non-natural non-ontological property of being right, whereas Railton would describe it as a true, positive proposition, essentially involving a normative, non-natural concept. They both agree that these are just two ways of saying the same thing. But are they really?

Well, if Parfit and Railton simply identify the normative non-ontological property of being right with the normative, non-natural concept *right*, and facts with true propositions, then, obviously, Parfit and Railton are saying the same thing. Gibbard seems to think that this is the right way to view the situation (215). But this identification is problematic, as Parfit himself suggests (228). It is very odd to identify the concept of a certain property with the property itself. Concepts, on the standard picture, are ingredients in thought and reasoning and what we categorize things with. Properties, on the other hand, are ways things could be, which can be conceptualized in different ways or perhaps in no way at all, if our conceptual resources are too limited.

Perhaps Parfit and Railton do not mean to identify the concept *right* and the non-ontological property of being right. Perhaps what they mean is that if the normative, non-natural, concept *right* applies to an action, then we can *say* that the concept is a concept of a normative, non-natural, non-ontological property, and that this property is exemplified by the action. This is just a *way of speaking*, however, with no ontological implications. But it is still clear that the concept is not identical to the property the concept is a concept of.

However, Railton and other naturalists surely add something to this picture, namely, that for any true claim that an action is right, there is always a natural ontologically weighty property that fits the concept *right*. On Railton's own theory, this is the natural property that best satisfies the job description that the concept *right* is associated with (or that fixes the reference of the concept *right*). So, on this naturalist picture, there is a clear sense in which a true claim that an action is right states the perfectly natural fact that the action has N, where N is the natural property that satisfies the job description for the concept *right*. To add that the normative claim can be said to state a normative, non-natural, non-ontological fact does not change the fact that it also states a natural ontological fact. So, it is difficult to see how Parfit can agree with Railton and still maintain that irreducibly normative claims cannot state natural facts.

Parfit could reply that by 'stating a fact' he means 'expressing a true proposition', not 'describing an ontological fact'. And since Railton and he agree that irreducibly normative claims express propositions that essentially involve irreducibly normative concepts (and not propositions that involve natural concepts), they both agree that no normative claim can, in this sense, state a natural ontological fact. But note that this does not show that they agree about *which* proposition a normative claim states. Recall that for Railton, but not for Parfit, there is a job description associated with the rightness concept, to be satisfied by natural properties. This means that Railton's

rightness concept must be different from Parfit's rightness concept: Two concepts cannot be identical if one is associated with a job description and the other is not. Hence, the proposition involving Railton's rightness concept must also be different from the proposition involving Parfit's rightness concept. So, they do not even agree on which proposition is stated by a normative claim.

The disagreement runs even deeper because Railton accepts that true normative propositions are *made true* by some ontological natural facts: the proposition that *x* is right is made true by the ontological natural fact that *x* has *N*, where *N* is the natural property that satisfies the job description for rightness. But this is something Parfit explicitly denies: no normative proposition is made true by an ontological natural or normative fact (59). That normative propositions are made true by the way they correctly describe reality is part and parcel of *alethic realism*, which he emphatically denies (58–59).

As far as we can see, then, some fundamental disagreements remain between Parfit and Railton. Contrary to what they conclude, it seems impossible for their two views to converge fully. Consequently, Railton's diagnosis that he and Parfit speak in inter-translatable dialects appears premature.

4. Parfit's offer to quasi-realists

Parfit also reaches out to quasi-realists, and he engages especially with Allan Gibbard's view. What Parfit is offering to Gibbard is a view he calls the *expressivist cognitivist* view, which states that when we claim that some act is wrong we are both expressing an attitude of being against the action and a belief that in having this attitude we are 'getting it right' (43, 191).

Now, the crucial expression here is 'getting it right', and Parfit and Gibbard do not seem to be in agreement about how to understand it. It is true that both Parfit and Gibbard are fine with saying that your attitude against the action gets it right if it is *true* that the action is worthy of being disfavoured. But Parfit and Gibbard use 'true' in different senses when ascribing it to a normative claim, such as 'x is worthy of being disfavoured', or 'x is right'. Gibbard uses 'true' in a minimalist sense: saying that it is true that *p* does not add anything to just saying that *p* (221). Parfit, on the other hand, uses 'true' in a more than minimal sense, a 'descriptive' sense, as he calls it: 'true' means roughly 'characterizes the world in specific ways' (225, 226). In particular, Parfit maintains that to say that the claim that *x* is right is true is to say that the claim 'characterizes some feature of normative reality' (226). Parfit thinks that we need this more-than-minimal sense of 'true' in order to distinguish between traditional non-cognitivism à la Ayer and cognitivist views. For traditional non-cognitivists can say that we can express our aversion against *x*, with emphasis, by saying that the claim that *x* is wrong is true.

This difference in the senses of 'true' employed means that Parfit is not in agreement with quasi-realists, like Gibbard, about irreducibly normative facts. For when Gibbard says that there are such facts he is saying that there are *minimally* true normative propositions that essentially involve irreducibly normative concepts. In contrast, when Parfit says that there are normative facts, he is saying that there are *more than minimally* true normative propositions that essentially involve irreducibly normative concepts; more specifically, he is saying that these propositions 'characterize some features of normative reality'.

So, in the end it seems clear that there is a fundamental difference between Parfit's non-realist cognitivism and Gibbard's quasi-realism, and it seems impossible for the two views to converge fully.

One could also wonder whether Parfit's views on normative properties and normative truths are a stable combination of views. If normative properties are pleonastic, so that saying that *x* has the property of being right does not add anything to saying that *x* is right, why should we think that saying that it is true that *x* is right nevertheless does add something to saying that *x* is right? This is an especially pressing question, since Parfit defines descriptive normative truth as 'characterizing some feature of normative reality'. Since 'feature' here must refer to a pleonastic property, how can this notion of truth be more than minimal? Indeed, pleonastic properties seem to go hand in hand with pleonastic truth. What you get when a pleonastic property is exemplified is a pleonastic truth that something has this property. How can it be, then, that saying that it is true that *x* has the property of being right adds something to saying that *x* has the property of being right?

5. Concluding remarks

Parfit's conciliatory project has clear limits. It is true that he has shown (and made his opponents accept) that his brand of non-naturalism agrees with Railton's naturalism and Gibbard's quasi-realism that moral claims state irreducibly normative facts (true propositions involving irreducibly normative concepts). But this agreement is rather shallow, since they disagree about which rightness concept and truth concept go into these facts. They also disagree about whether there are any metaphysically robust truth-makers for moral claims. Let us, however, note in conclusion that one of the great virtues of *On What Matters, Volume 3* and its companion *Does Anything Really Matter?* is that Parfit and his critics bring to the fore what is at issue between the main rival views in metaethics. Both volumes force the reader to think hard about metaethical distinctions and why they matter. This we should thank Parfit for. Without his metaethical turn late in his career, we would not have benefitted from this important probing.³

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Reference

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