We are not human
A questionable perk of life as a professional philosopher is being the occasional recipient of unsolicited monographs by self-published amateurs. Affectionately known as “crazy books”, these volumes crash the mailroom of a Philosophy Department, bearing titles like Ethics of the Astral Plane or The Key To All Ontologies. They promise answers to the deepest, oldest questions: the meaning of life, the universe and everything, unearthed without the help of experts or academic training. Once, a high school student wrote me that he had been given a book by a colleague of mine who said he had written it. I felt terrible, not that I did not have time to read these books. What if somewhere within these words were the insights of an untutored genius, lost forever through the impatient cynicism of people like us?

I hope Derek Parfit’s friends will not be offended when I say that my colleague’s admiration made me think of him. The two of us wrote books that are, on the face of it, similar. Both of us have suggested that our personal debts to his extraordinary intellectual generosity.

The announcement of Parfit’s death inspired deep and widespread grief among philosophers. In part, this is because so many of us have personal debts to his extraordinary intellectual generosity. Parfit was a pioneer of the speed, acuity and sheer volume of his commentary on others’ work. But the grief reflects, too, Parfit’s stature as perhaps the pre-eminent moral philosopher of the past fifty years. Parfit’s work has had a profound impact on Anglophone philosophy and it is safe to predict that its influence will persist. Parfit was prodigiously inventive, overflowing with ideas. But some are especially central. The first, and still the most significant, is that our identity over time and distinctness from one another are less substantial, both metaphysically and ethically, than many of us suppose. This idea is what lies behind a passage from Parfit’s first book, Reasons and Persons, quoted in almost every obituary: “when I believed [in a deep fact of personal identity], I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my mind, I saw, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air”. Parfit’s view about the unimportance of personal identity is hard to formulate briefly and the arguments in support of it are intricate, resting on thought-experiments about malfunctioning Star Trek-style teleporters, actual experiments involving brain bioterrorism, and mash-ups that speculate about the transplant of cerebral hemispheres. The basic idea is that, in the absence of an immaterial soul, what unifies me over time – what makes me, now, the same person who started writing this review last week – is not connected by causal relations. As you might guess, the details of this argument are more plausibly understood as a reductio of Parfit’s personal identity without addressing the idea that we are animals of a certain species is like attempting to escape from a locked room without ever trying the key. But what is now called “animism” was not well-articulated when Parfit was writing and its subsequent development owes much to him. Nor does he ignore it in later work. Parfit objects to animism in a recent essay, alarmingly titled “We Are Not Human Beings”. In Reasons and Persons, his clipped prose, with its repetitive sentences, poetic cadence and sly humour becomes the vehicle for a depth and range of insight rarely matched in recent philosophy. The upshot is an Anglicized version of the Buddha’s “no-self” view, a philosophy that could change your life. Fast forward almost thirty years, and as passages from Reasons and Persons were being chanted by Tibetan monks, Parfit published the first two volumes of his long-awaited sequel, On What Matters. It too is metaphysical, but what interests Parfit now is not the metaphysics of persons but of reasons for acting. According to Parfit, there are objective truths about how we should live, what there is reason to do, and what is right and wrong, that are irreducible, causally inert, and wholly independent of us. Not only are these truths independent of what we think and of our nature as human beings, the reasons that govern us are independent of what we want. None of this prevents us from knowing what they are. Through this austere lens, Parfit frames a theory of right action as obedience to principled reasons that have demand that reasons bear some intelligible question is more plausibly understood as a reductio of Parfit’s personal identity without addressing the idea that we are animals of a certain species is like attempting to escape from a locked room without ever trying the key. But what is now called “animism” was not well-articulated when Parfit was writing and its subsequent development owes much to him. Nor does he ignore it in later work. Parfit objects to animism in a recent essay, alarmingly titled “We Are Not Human Beings”. In Reasons and Persons, his clipped prose, with its repetitive sentences, poetic cadence and sly humour becomes the vehicle for a depth and range of insight rarely matched in recent philosophy. The upshot is an Anglicized version of the Buddha’s “no-self” view, a philosophy that could change your life. 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