We are not human

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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.

One such volume, written by a colleague who stopped me short a long time ago, made me glance at the date. It was Parfit’s first book, his translation of a book called L’homme de la nuit which adapts and renovates a formula from the history of the Enlightenment. For some philosophers, Parfit’s argument for irreducibility begins by dismissing “Analytical Naturalism”, which aims to specify what “reason” means in naturalist terms. Like many philosopheurs, Parfit is sceptical of logical analysis. If we can say in other terms what it is to be a reason, it is by doing metaphysics, not linguistic analysis. That is how we learn that heat is molecular kinetic energy, for example – not by analysing words but by investigating its nature. For Parfit, what blocks this approach to reasons is the principle that, when it is informative to learn that what is A is also B, (even though A is the same as being B), the meaning of either “A” or “B” can be further analysed. For instance, in the case of heat, it is informative to learn that what is hot has high molecular kinetic energy because, even though these terms pick out a single property, they do so in different ways. The meaning of “hot” can be analysed, Parfit thinks, in terms of the causes and effects of heat. This sets the stage for his central argument. Since the meaning of “reason” cannot be further analysed and it is informative to learn, in other terms, when something is a reason, it follows by Parfit’s principle that the property of being a reason cannot be identified with any property expressed in those terms. Unlike heat, which reduces to molecular kinetic energy, being a reason does not reduce to anything else.

As you might guess, the details of this argument need careful scrutiny. This is difficult terrain, even for experts. The force of Parfit’s reasoning turns on whether his principle about information, identity and meaning is true. But the truth of this principle is far from obvious and Parfit does not argue for it. It is hard not to be dismayed by this omission. One of the deep reasons why Parfit is so-called “analytical philosophy” was a great advance in clarity about the dimensions of meaning, through the work of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, followed by, among others, Saul Kripke and Gareth Evans. Not even Parfit can dismiss his work.

In principle, Parfit’s disengagement from the history of analytic and earlier philosophers could be generative. It could make room for bold new ideas. But it is also a liability. While there are moments of genius in On What Matters, there are moments that frustrate as well. Professional philosophers will make time to read it; they will study it and learn from it. Those less patient and more cynical may turn instead to Reasons and Persons, to the passages chanted by Tibetan monks, and to a picture of themselves at once perplexing and persuasive, beautiful and bizarre.