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.

On a more serious note, when I have made the acquaintance of a colleague stopped me short. He always felt bad, that said, we did not have time to read these books. What if somewhere within these books 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 admonition made me think of him. The author of two wildly ambitious books in moral philosophy, Reasons and Persons (1984) and On What Matters (2011), Parfit had no formal education in the subject. He read history at Oxford, then switched to philosophy while visiting Columbia and Harvard, before returning to Oxford as a Prize Fellow at All Souls College, where he read, thought, and wrote about philosophy – amid numerous visiting appointments in the US – until his unexpected death in January 2017.

The announcement of Parfit’s death inspired deep and widespread grief among philosophers. In part, this is because so many of our personal debts to his extraordinary intellectual generosity. Parfit was legendary for 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 Anglo-American 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, from a “mash-up” 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 a web of relations between the brain and the intervening days. The most important of these relations are psychological, matters of continuity and connection in memory, belief and will, which I can bear to other people, too, though I typically do so to vastly lesser degrees. On this view, the “separateness of persons” is diminished, and the rational response is a corresponding diminution in self-interest, a greater willingness to sacrifice myself for the greater good. There is a path from the insubstantial nature of personal identity to a more altruistic ethics.

There are notable gaps in Parfit’s reasoning. His argument neglects the view that we are fundamentally human: our identity and personal life. That is a core assumption of defining 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 “animalism” 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 animalism 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 Buddhist “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 metaphysically, 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 principles and makes sense for everyone to legislate for all.

Volume One of On What Matters is devoted to the interpretation of this gnomic principle, which adapts and renovates a formula from Kant: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law”. But this is not the subject of the books under review. They focus instead on Parfit’s “non-reductive cognitivism”, his belief in ethical truths that are utterly unlike mental truths or physical truths, and his attempt to make sense for everyone to legislate for all.

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As you might guess, the details of this argument need careful scrutiny. This is difficult because these terms pick out a single property, unlike his dramatic conclusions about the moral status of animals or the future of moral philosophy: “Disbelief in God, openly admitted by a major-