Not Quite a Person

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I first met Derek Parfit when I was a graduate student in Oxford, sitting at the back of the 10 Merton Street Lecture Room, listening to him talk to a roomful of eager but intimidated philosophy graduate students. Derek posed a question to the class that occasioned silence and puzzlement in response. That silence emboldened me to raise my hand and to articulate, quite badly I’m sure, an idea I had when I was in law school.

If I may indulge in some autobiography to set the stage. The misery of law school drove me to spend as much time thinking about philosophical ideas as I could. It struck me as odd that, as far as I knew, philosophical thinking assumed that the stuff of choice was akin to the stuff of science, i.e., that valuable things in life were measurable as better/more, worse/lesser or equally good/equal. When I reflected on my own life, it seemed to me that all the important choices I faced were ones in which i) it wasn’t true that one alternative was better, ii) it would be a mistake to flip a coin between them, and iii), it would be madness to think that they couldn’t be compared. I remember thinking that if I could wave a magic wand and make the world see normative reality as I saw it – full of comparable things that were neither better, worse, or as good as one another but *just different*, we would have fewer wars. People wouldn’t assume that their way of life is best but recognize that there are many different ways of living, all of which are objectively ‘on a par’. Toleration would be built into the way we live with one another.

I remember being quite excited by this idea, and thinking how, if I was right, then economic theory as a whole rested on mistaken foundations. That governmental policy-making would need to be rethought from the ground up. That we would have a new grounding for affirmative action. That egalitarianism would need to be rejiggered. That we would have to reimagine reflective equilibrium as not geared toward a single point but towards multiple points. That Dworkin’s ‘Right Answer Thesis’ was wrong. And that I should no longer agonize about what path was best in the face of my hard choices. At some point I remember venturing to Littauer Hall to see Amartya Sen. I remember very little of the content of our talk, but I came away with two conclusions. First, Sen had sent me away with the assignment to read Debreu’s *Theory of Value,* and I concluded that he – probably rightly – wanted me to develop some formal chops before I started to run with large, provocative ideas. Second, that, although he treated me with respect and politeness, he thought I was bonkers.

This is all by way of background to say how extraordinary and serendipitous it was that, on a different continent in a room far, far away, someone as distinguished as Derek Parfit asked a question that seemed to me to touch exactly on an idea I had filed away some time ago. That encounter in 10 Merton Street quite literally changed my life. Derek got very excited by what I was saying and told me to come see him so we could talk further. As it turned out, the idea that Derek was fishing for from that fateful class was one about imprecision in ordering values. My idea was that there is a fourth, sui generis ordering relation and that the structure of normativity was not what the orthodoxy maintained. We were both interested in the implications of our views for thinking about normative reality. I was a mere graduate student, thrashing around in deep waters. Derek picked me up by the collar and got me to dry land.

I remember my first supervision at his room at All Souls. I was struck by his room’s decor – 60’s mod, with two brown swirly upholstered chairs facing one another framing the fireplace. I remember thinking ‘this guy is serious and we are going to roll up our sleeves and really talk philosophy’. (I’ve now set up my own rooms at University College in this way – with two comfy chairs facing one another for some intense and focused discussion.) I can’t recall whether our first supervision was long, but thereafter, our meetings were regularly 5-8 hour events. He would invite me to come talk with him over lunch at All Souls, which I later learned was roughly when he woke up, and then we’d continue talking all afternoon until dinnertime, at which point he would take me to the All Souls Common Room, where we would hang at the back so we could enter the dining hall last and sit together at the end of the table and continue talking philosophy without having to chitchat with others. I infer that he had had his knuckles wrapped over this practice, since more than once the Warden would make a point of forcing us to sit closer to the head of the table and talk with other guests. On these occasions, Derek could barely conceal his annoyance. But we’d always return to his rooms after dinner for several hours of further philosophical discussion. Eventually, I’d declare that I was tired and had to go back to my rooms. He was, I guessed, nearly thirty years my senior, but I always started flagging before he did.

What was especially wonderful about talking philosophy with Derek in those early days was that he gave me permission to be fearless. It wasn’t that he was full of Pollyannish encouragement; it was rather that he treated me like a peer and took what I said seriously and engaged in vigorous argument with me. When we talked philosophy together, we would both be in flow – talking quickly and intensely in a way I later learned was very rare to find with someone else – and so the time flew by quickly. One of the most striking things about Derek was that his ego was utterly absent when he was engaged in philosophical discussion, which encouraged his interlocutor to shed theirs as well. I’ve never encountered another philosopher – nay, academic! – for whom that is true.

Back then, we were both very fast thinkers, but he was much faster than I and of course knew orders of magnitude more. I would sometimes use the fact that I needed to powder my nose as an excuse to think in the loo about something especially challenging that he said, and that always worked – I could come up with something that could move the discussion forward. One thing I never understood was that he almost never had to powder *his* nose during our meetings, even though he would sip water at a pretty steady clip over many hours. When I returned from the loo, he always seemed a tad impatient – how inconvenient it was to have bodies that needed tending to during philosophical discussion! Another fact about Derek as an interlocutor: he would *never* take sides in an argument for the sake of argument but would only push for what he thought was true. I, on the other hand, would flip flop and think of arguments on both sides because I often wasn’t sure what I thought. One of the strange things about our intellectual rapport is that we rarely agreed. He once said to me that we were a great intellectual fit because we agreed with each other just enough to have profitable disagreements that pushed things further.

Without Derek, I most certainly would not have become a philosopher. He was many things to me, and over time, our relationship changed. He started off as a godlike figure to me, then he became a kind of wonderful crazy uncle, and then, during the last twenty or so years of his life, a dear friend and someone towards whom I felt deeply protective and even maternal. As I grew older, I began to realize how innocent and unworldly Derek was. Larissa MacFarquhar, who wrote a stunning profile of Derek for *The New Yorker,* told me that I was like a mother bear when she interviewed me for the piece.

After I left Oxford, Derek and I didn’t talk as much, and he became more and more obsessed with his own views and would relate everything to what he was thinking. I remember spending *hours and hours* arguing with him about whether Bernard Williams, who had then passed away, had the concept of a normative reason. (Sam Scheffler has an amusing story about Derek on this point involving his wife, Katy, and a cocktail party). I *knew* Bernard and it seemed to me very clear that he had Derek’s concept of a normative reason. I went through passages of ‘Internal and External Reasons’ and other work of Bernard’s showing how the way Derek was interpreting Bernard was not the only way to interpret him. He was clearly alarmed at my confidence that Bernard had the concept, and whenever I would see him – when he was at Rutgers, for instance – he would renew our argument. In the end, however, I failed to convince him. I had the sense that I could not convince him of anything – he had to come to a view by himself. Derek was through and through an autodidact.

Derek stayed with me and my philosopher husband Kit Fine at Harvard one term when he was teaching there and I was on a fellowship, and he stayed with us in New York on and off, giving me a photographer’s advice about the horrific lighting in our guest room. I greatly enjoyed feeding him since he tended not to eat hot meals. I remember one evening when I made him a huge bowl of hot, steaming seafood noodles, which he slurped up and then asked for more. Did he have a hollow leg? He ate copious quantities, even by Chinese standards, and I remember being so happy that I could give him warm nourishment – we had a running disagreement about the importance of hot food for the body. When I visited him at his beautiful house in London, he would feed me a carton of Covent Garden soup – I couldn’t help but think heated up for my benefit – and cold berries doused with fizzy water. I knew that he regarded eating as an inconvenient waste of time, necessary only to fuel his thinking. He was famously averse to socializing and chitchat. He would sometimes tell me that so-and-so invited him to dinner, and could I let the person know that he didn’t really socialize? He found it stressful that people wanted to socialize with him when he would rather be doing philosophy.

One day, in New York, when he was living uptown, he called me to say that he thought he was having a heart attack. After grilling him about immediate symptoms and ascertaining that he was not going to drop dead on the spot, I instructed him to get into a cab and meet me at the hospital. When I arrived at the hospital, he was in a gown surrounded by doctors in the emergency room, and I pushed through them to see how he was. He was obviously very glad to see me, and the first thing he said was ‘What are you working on?’. They ran tests and decided that he had indigestion of some sort, and Derek’s reaction was one of utter embarrassment. Very English. He seemed to feel better when I reminded him that it was extremely difficult to distinguish heartburn from a heart attack.

The second major medical episode happened when he was at Rutgers. He was living in Jeff McMahan’s house at the time, and Jeff can tell the story with more detail than I. But I remember several of us visiting him in turn every day and our being utterly exhausted dealing with medical records and what not, while Derek was trying to talk philosophy with us. He even insisted on conducting a PhD viva of Johann Frick from his bed. (Johann passed with flying colours). One day in hospital Derek excitedly reported to me that one of the doctors had pronounced that his X-ray films were “incompatible with life”. He was thrilled. (Jeff later told me that the doctor had actually said “*almost* incompatible with life”.) His glee reminded me of a similar glee I saw in Isaiah Berlin, with whom I was fortunate to have had regular lunches; Isaiah would regularly pause on our way to the lunch room to regale me with a story about each of the Great and the Good whose portraits hung on the walls outside the Senior Common Room, *always* ending his tale with a perfunctory “Now dead”, along with a slight twinkle in his eye signaling appreciation that he, himself was still alive and kicking.

As Derek was readying volume 3 of *On What Matters,* we talked about his future intellectual plans. He was planning a reboot of *Reasons and Persons*, as he was dissatisfied with various aspects of it. He would then turn to metaphysics. He was fascinated by time and time’s arrow. And he wanted to think more about why there was something rather than nothing. I remember arguing with him about whether he should devote his energy solely to *Reasons and Persons 2.0* as his next project and encouraging him to turn to his projects in metaphysics immediately. About two weeks before he died, we were in communication about a pair of articles he had agreed to write for a volume co-edited by Kurt Sylvan and me. The point of the volume was in part to name a subfield in philosophy, ‘the philosophy of practical reason’, which then consisted of work scattered throughout metaethics, moral psychology, the philosophy of action and mind and epistemology, and to create a teaching volume centered around the set of issues about practical reason that cut across the usual subdisciplines of philosophy. Derek agreed to write a piece on objectivism about reasons and another on nonnaturalism in normativity, both of which would update, while drawing upon, his published work in *On What Matters.* Sadly, Derek died before he could write those pieces.

Toward the end of his life, Derek became more openly emotional. He would weep readily, sometimes in public over meals, usually occasioned by his talking about his family. He felt the suffering of others acutely. He was hurt by unkind and disrespectful feedback he had received on *On What Matters.* He was nervous before the Schock Prize ceremony in Sweden, but he was typically brilliant and gracious at what was a glorious event. In his later years, he would talk to me about various emotional things in his life, and I was always grateful that he felt safe and loved in my company. I remember one occasion on which he was clearly feeling conflicted about something in his personal life, and he wanted to talk with me about how he *should* feel instead of just letting himself feel the conflicting emotions. He seemed to feel negative emotions very rarely and was unsure how to handle them. Sometimes I would tell him how strange he was; more than once – and only half in jest – I wondered aloud whether he might be a changeling. Months before his sad and untimely death, I said to him “You’re not quite a person, you know?” Unfazed, he replied that Janet Radcliffe Richards, his dear wife, would often say the same thing. I think only his closest friends will know that this was our way of saying that we saw him, understood him, and loved him.