SECULAR ETHICS

Who has the ability and the time to think about what really matters to humanity? Some believe that it is philosophers who have the innate ability to think about such matters and that the ability cannot be taught. Academic philosophers have the time to think but can seem foreign. They communicate using an abstruse language, and have their own strange ways. David Edmonds uses the life story of Derek Parfit (1942–2017) to guide and entertain us through one man’s journey in the land of philosophy and explain the landscape and its people.

The first part of Parfit’s life was full of ethical theory versus practical ethics. Eventually he would end up almost unrecognisable from the Parfit of his youth. We follow Parfit from China where he was born of missionary doctor parents, back to a UK education as a high achieving and popular scholarship boy at Eton. His intelligence and charm opened most doors for him. An abundance of superlative references included, ‘perhaps the most impressive thing about him is that despite his considerable talent, he has remained a modest and charming person’. This earned him more invitations than he could accept. He does make an unsolicited invitation to intern at the New Yorker magazine, a scholarship to study undergraduate history at Balliol College, Oxford, and a Harkness Fellowship in the US. Then and for the rest of his life he switched his focus to philosophy and had a succession of fellowships at All Souls College, Oxford, with regular invitations to US universities. All the time he was becoming both more bizarre and more dedicated to climbing different sides on the mountain of philosophical thinking to get to that one single view and understanding at the top. He never reached the peak but as we follow his life story climbing the mountain, more of the vista of modern philosophy is revealed to us. We get an overview of the flow of thought in Western philosophy.

Most people have never heard of Derek Parfit. He was a moral philosopher whose reasonings have probably influenced the way many of us (the non-philosophers who are stuck in the foothills of the mountain) think today. He described his work as ‘thinking about what matters’. This included personal identity, rationality, ethics, and the nature of our concern for future generations. Parfit once summed up the entire history of ethics in four steps. 1. Forbidden by God; 2. Forbidden by God, therefore wrong; 3. Wrong, therefore forbidden by God; 4. Wrong.

He believed we could apply reason and logic to ethics without the distorting influence of God. He would say that secular ethics was a toddler taking its first stumbling steps. Unfortunately, not all branches and problems of philosophy can be defined so succinctly but need longer explanations with illuminating thought experiments to tease out the nature of the dilemmas and explore ethical theory versus practical ethics.

Although he had a 50-year career as an academic philosopher, he only wrote two books, Reasons and Persons and On What Matters (a three-volume book of moral philosophy), with about 50 other papers. Philosophy often considers the same ancient problems studied since Plato. Parfit added new problems such as ‘the non-identity problem’ to the discipline. This considers our moral obligations regarding issues such as safeguarding our planet from the climate and ecological crisis for the benefit of future generations (that is, the people who do not exist yet).

“"All the time he was becoming both more bizarre and more dedicated to climbing different sides on the mountain of philosophical thinking to get to that one single view and understanding at the top.”"
These and other arguments are all discussed and well explained in the book. Beyond the book there are many videos on the web of Parfit himself and others explaining his thinking. Despite his lack of quantity of published outputs his quality marks him as one of the most influential philosophers in the last century. Parfit forfeited many of the routine human pleasures trying to eke out enough time to resolve all the important matters that concerned him. His change from being a talented, charming, selfish, and normal youth and young man to a fanatical, selfish, benevolent and eccentric older man marks him out as a case study of a possible side effect when you have both the ability and the time to think about what matters to humanity.

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The Oxford Handbook of Medical Ethics and Law (Oxford Medical Handbooks) Anna Smajdor, Jonathan Herring, and Robert Wheeler

Oxford University Press, 2022, PB, 384pp, £22.00, 978-0199659425

KEY ETHICAL TOOLS

GPs are sometimes portrayed as the ethical good guys.1 Ethics, law, and professionalism have an explicit place in the Royal College of General Practitioners curriculum statement on being a GP.2 Regardless, it can be hard to know what to read when an educational need arises in relation to ethics. Where do we start? Do we pick up a book to read on the beach, or in a cosy chair by the fire? Do we open a drawer to consult a pocket reference when a patient encounter leaves us feeling uncertain and slightly panicky, with that ‘sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach’?3

The Oxford Handbook of Medical Ethics and Law appears suitable for the contexts described above. It is a brief and easily searchable quick reference, and it covers key ethical tools to think through a case. It covers key aspects of the law as well as a variety of practice-specific situations. It has a useful section on key laws, such as the Abortion Act 1967, the Gender Recognition Act 2004, the Mental Health Act of 1983, and the Mental Capacity Act of 2005.

Despite being pocket-sized, it also doesn’t shy away from some of the little historical controversies that can sometimes leave us a little cynical about ethical norms and values. For example, it reflects that, despite its widespread mythology, the Hippocratic oath is not a binding covenant sworn by all doctors. It also notes that, while we make use of Aristotelian virtues and logic, we have to do so being mindful that the historical Aristotle would probably have supported ideas no longer condoned, such as the possession of slaves and the subjugation of women.

The handbook’s only major flaw (spoiler – it is and it isn’t a flaw), particularly from a general practice perspective, is in part four, ‘Ethico-Legal Issues by Medical Specialism’. These are alphabetical and it and the issues seem very arbitrarily allocated. This is both misleading for non-medics and frustrating for medical readers. As a GP, for example, I would argue that dilemmas over circumcision are hardly emblematic of family medicine. However, this is not a reason to avoid the book, and I found plenty in the other ‘specialties’ that map on to the learning needs of a GP, and I don’t doubt this would be the case for other specialties.

The idea of ethics being nuanced by specialty is a very interesting one, and one that deserves more attention by postgraduate medical educators. Perhaps the answer here is a page explaining how different specialties may encounter issues with greater frequency than others, or may set greater store by some duties, rather than others, and rather than this quick and dirty attempt to pigeonhole the issues. This ethical heterodoxy is definitely something that can contribute to interprofessional disagreement.4 It may also figure in how a profession sees its unique selling point. For example, Howard Brody and others talk of the complexity with regards to consent arising from the long and varied relationship that a family doctor has with patients and their families, and the power of a patient with capacity in the ‘office’ rather than in an emergency setting.5,6

All in all this is a useful book, which I would recommend whether for the surgery shelf or the home library. Similarly, I think this is a useful introductory text for those embarking on a course or qualification in medical ethics and/or law, as well as for those contemplating a role that involves ethics education.

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