Derek Parfit as I Knew Him

Jeff McMahan

1 Introduction

My first sighting of Derek Parfit was in the autumn of 1978, at the beginning of my first term as a graduate student at Oxford. It was in 10 Merton Street, the building that at the time housed Oxford's Sub-faculty of Philosophy. I recall following Parfit from the library there into the small lecture theater for the first meeting of the seminar he taught that term. I distinctly remember thinking that he was rather peculiar in appearance: gangling and bent forward from the waist, with his trousers pulled too high and a slightly pompadoured hairdo. I would later recognize the same angle at the waist in his mother, in whose house I would be living a year later.

I am chagrined to be unable to remember even what the topic of the seminar was. Apart from that initial impression of his slightly unprepossessing appearance, only two memories linger. One is of Parfit writhing almost convulsively in his chair, taking occasional swigs from a vodka bottle, as he wrestled with the ideas and arguments that vied for his assent. The clear liquid in the bottle was, I soon learned, water. The reason it was in a vodka bottle, I later learned, is that he always had an abundant stock of those bottles, as he drank vodka copiously, and directly from the bottle, just before going to bed, as a means of treating his insomnia. The vodka, together with a fistful of tablets of amitriptyline, one of the old tricyclic antidepressants, was the only way that his doctors could find to subdue the ideas and arguments that raged in his mind long enough to enable him to go to sleep and stay asleep for a time. I recall his once telling me, with envy, about a classmate at Eton who thought that going to sleep was entirely voluntary and who could *will* himself to sleep. All this student had to do, he claimed, was tell himself, "Cripps, go to sleep," and he would immediately fall asleep.

My second memory from that seminar is that there was one student who raised his hand once after every lecture to ask a question that was barely

comprehensible but, to the extent that one could make any sense of it, was invariably stupid. Soon, when this student hoisted his arm, there was an audible collective sigh, and every eye in the room other than Parfit's rolled. I have no recollection of whether the collective exhalations and rotating eyeballs subsided later in the term, but I, for one, came actually to relish these questions—for they provided the audience with a rare intellectual treat. Parfit would listen courteously while this rather pompous student spouted nonsense and would then say, "Thank you; that's very interesting. As I understand what you are saying . . .," and would immediately go on to introduce some novel and fascinating idea that had been suggested to him by a cluster of words the student had uttered. He would set this idea forth lucidly, confect an ingenious objection to it, offer a reply to the objection, then reply to the reply, and so on. These were captivating displays of spontaneous intellectual and philosophical brilliance. But Parfit was not showing off; nor were his impromptu intellectual gymnastics only an effort to prevent the student from being humiliated. He also took every suggestion, however daft, sufficiently seriously to consider whether there might be some more reasonable idea lurking nearby. The student, I assume, always left the seminar in a glow of pride at having posed such a probing question.

Kindness and charity came entirely naturally to Parfit. Throughout the thirty-eight years in which I knew him well, I never heard him utter an unkind word about anyone, even those who had been unkind or unjust to him. His behavior in seminars, lectures, and other discussions was in this respect unusual at the time. Lectures by visiting speakers in Oxford and Cambridge seemed to be regarded by many members of the faculty as occasions for competitions to determine who could most cleverly and wittily not only refute but eviscerate the speaker. Even students were not always spared. I recall attending another graduate seminar a few years later in Cambridge that was co-taught by two distinguished philosophers. There was an American student whose questions were earnest but rather ploddingly and laboriously expressed. On one occasion while this student was speaking, one of the professors tore off a little scrap of paper, scrawled something on it, and passed it with a knowing look to the other. The other professor read it and they shared a chuckle, obviously at the expense of the student who was speaking. On another occasion the more senior philosopher asked the class, "Are there any further questions before we move on?" The American raised his hand in a way that was visible to all, but the professor swept his gaze across the room and announced, "In that case we'll move on to the next topic." It is unimaginable that Parfit would ever have been flagrantly cruel in that way to anyone.

During the autumn term in 1978 when I attended Parfit's seminar, my DPhil thesis was being supervised by Jonathan Glover. Although being able to work with Glover was a consummation of my hopes, he soon recognized that the issues in which I was most interested—abortion, when we begin to exist, the difference between killing an embryo or fetus and preventing a person from coming into existence, whether there are reasons to cause well-off people to exist, and so on—were more closely related to what Parfit was working on at the time. He therefore asked Parfit if he would be willing to become my supervisor, and Parfit agreed.

An abbreviated history of my subsequent relations with Parfit can be stated in a few brief paragraphs—though because I am now describing a period in which we had become friends, I will henceforth refer to him as "Derek" (a name, he once told me, he had always hated). He became my official supervisor for the next two terms, until the summer of 1979. At that point the funding I had had from the Rhodes Trust ended. I had been offered a couple of what were called research studentships at different Oxford colleges, but the stipends were insufficient for me to live on. St John's College, Cambridge, however, offered me a research studentship with a stipend on which I could live and free housing as well. Derek's advice, almost verbatim, was: "Take Cambridge's money, go there on occasion to satisfy whatever requirements there may be, but live in Oxford and continue to work with me. I will arrange for you and Sally [my wife at the time] to have the top-floor flat in my parents' house in North Oxford." So, for the academic year 1979–80 we alternated between Oxford and Cambridge, living for a short period in one place and then the other, driving back and forth in a second-hand car I was able to buy for £500. But the small house that St John's gave me was a block and a half from the college and half a block from Jesus Green, a large park on one side of the Cam. So coveted were the properties on our little road that, when he was not in London, Clive James (the celebrated writer and broadcaster) lived in a house across the street. Furthermore, I requested and was assigned Bernard Williams as the supervisor of my PhD thesis. These two circumstances, together with the fact that Cambridge offered a more bucolic environment than Oxford, persuaded me after the end of the year to leave Norman and Jessie Parfit's house—the house in which Derek would have grown up had he not been almost continuously resident in boarding schools—to live full-time in Cambridge.

Yet I continued, at his invitation, indeed insistence, to meet with Derek regularly in Oxford to discuss both my work and, to a lesser degree, his, as the issues I was addressing overlapped substantially with those on which he was

writing in his increasingly obsessive work on *Reasons and Persons*. I therefore had an almost uniquely privileged career as a doctoral student. I had not only frequent supervisions with Bernard Williams but also almost equally frequent supervisions with Derek. (I recall insisting that I should pay Derek whatever he would have been paid by Oxford for the supervision of a DPhil student; but that turned out to be around £20 per term, and I think my punctiliousness about not exploiting his generosity soon lapsed.) It was also a slightly befuddling graduate career, as I was writing what I think may have been the first doctoral thesis wholly within the area of systematic ethical theory that later came to be known as population ethics—and I was writing it under the simultaneous supervision of both the progenitor of that entire area of philosophy and the most eminent living moral philosopher, who, as it happened, was then writing a book (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*) devoted to explaining why systematic ethical theory was misguided and a waste of time.

As I had generous funding from St John's for seven years, I stayed there until the funding ended. After that, in 1986, I returned to the US. This was before there was widely accessible email, but Derek and I continued to exchange letters, mostly commenting on each other's work; and we occasionally spoke on the phone, sometimes for several hours, particularly during the last couple of years of the twentieth century, when we had long discussions of arguments I was developing in completing the writing of a book, *The Ethics of Killing*. But apart from these discussions and my occasional visits to Oxford, my contact with Derek was less extensive between 1986 and 2007, when he began to teach at Rutgers, where I was teaching at the time. Between 2007 and 2014, when I left Rutgers for Oxford, Derek taught at Rutgers five times, each time for seven weeks. During those periods, he lived in my house. And when I moved to Oxford in early November of 2014, I lived in his house there until he died in London shortly after midnight on January 2, 2017. During his final decade, therefore, I probably had more personal contact with him than anyone other than his wife, Janet—though he also had extensive contact with Larry Temkin, whose work (on the issues addressed in his *Rethinking the Good*) was closer to what Derek was working on in those years than mine was (as I was working primarily on the ethics of self-defense and war).

2 Elements of Character: Genius and Generosity

The two most striking of Derek's attributes as a supervisor were his extraordinary generosity and kindness and his formidable and involuntarily

intimidating intelligence. He would often begin our supervisions by saying of the material that I had submitted in advance, "This is all excellent and can go straight into the thesis with little alteration. I have only a few minor comments . . ."—whereupon he would produce, in the gentlest possible way, as if they really were only minor points, a series of objections to my arguments that seemed to me both devastating and decisive. I had, however, only a moment's dejected contemplation of the ruins, for his objections would be immediately followed by a range of constructive suggestions about how the argument could be rebuilt or the conclusions modified in response to the objections. As Frances Kamm observed in the brief remarks she sent to me to read out at the memorial event I organized at All Souls College about five months after Derek's death, "One never had to fear Derek because he presented his comments in the kindest and most constructive way." I think everyone who discussed philosophy with him over the decades would confirm this.

Although it was exhilarating to participate in these discussions, it was also deflating, as the gulf between his analytical abilities and mine seemed almost unbridgeable. I was just intelligent enough to be intensely aware of how much more intelligent he was. He was by far the most brilliant thinker I have ever known. Over the years while he was alive and I was engaged in thinking about his ideas and arguments, I often thought that I had found a mistake in his work. But almost invariably when I discussed the matter with him, I discovered that I was the one who had been mistaken. He had simply seen deeper than I had. He was by far the deepest, most rigorous, and most imaginative thinker I have ever known.

In his responses to my objections, there was never the slightest trace of defensiveness or dogmatism. If one of my objections had been correct, he would almost certainly have recognized that, acknowledged his mistake, and altered his views accordingly. I have known a number of philosophers, some of whom have been highly distinguished, who have been profoundly averse to admitting that they have advanced an unsound argument or defended an erroneous view. This has always struck me as odd, even in egoistic terms. Errors are eventually exposed. Why would someone want to become known as the tenacious and unyielding defender of an exploded view? Derek was less egoistic about his work than any other philosopher I have known. His was a largely disinterested concern with discovering and making known the truth, particularly about morality. He therefore always invited and welcomed criticism of his arguments. Philosophers now routinely send their work in progress to colleagues, and sometimes even to philosophers they do not know,

with a request for comments. My sense is that these practices were largely unknown when Derek entered the field in the late 1960s. But very early in his career he sent photocopies of long manuscripts both to philosophers he knew and to philosophers he did not know. A number of the returned manuscripts were among his papers when he died and on some of them he had written in hand that he had made the left margin unusually wide so that the recipient could write comments by hand and then return the manuscript to him. I think, though I cannot confirm, that Derek's practice was the source of the freedom that contemporary philosophers feel in sending their work out to others they do not know in the hope of receiving comments.

I had always assumed that Derek's praise of my work at the beginning of a supervision, before the demolition work began, was uncalculated, just the natural expression of his kindly and generous character. But during the last year of his life, when I was living in his house, we met by chance in the hallway outside his study. He took the opportunity to thank me for some written comments that I had recently sent him on some of the material on which he was working for *On What Matters: Volume Three*. After expressing his gratitude, he observed that my comments had not included anything complimentary about the work I had read and encouraged me never to neglect to find something in a person's work to praise, even if I thought the person did not need any reassurance. That last phrase was intended to indicate that he was aware that I had simply assumed that he knew how highly I thought of his work. But his remark prompted me subsequently to wonder whether his earlier praise of my student work was after all calculated to support my morale—and also, indeed, whether even at that late point in his life he really did still need reassurance about the quality of his work.

I will insert here one endearing piece of evidence for the view that, at least earlier, he did need such reassurance. Shortly before the manuscript of *Reasons and Persons* had to be delivered to Oxford University Press for there to be any prospect that his fellowship at All Souls would be renewed, he asked me if my wife and I could come from Cambridge to help him. We accordingly went to live in All Souls for the final week before his deadline to do whatever he asked of us. One of my tasks was to sort through the chaotic piles of paper in his study to determine whether there were, for example, papers that he needed to cite or that should be included in the bibliography. (Although Derek was one of the first philosophers to use a computer for writing, he seems never to have learned about a couple of other items of advanced technology: the stapler and the paper clip.) On one piece of paper I found, he had typed comments that various highly distinguished philosophers had written

about his work. As I subsequently discovered, the quotations were mainly drawn from letters of reference or letters of evaluation that All Souls had solicited when the fellows had deliberated about the extension of his fellowship. There were passages praising his work by such luminaries as John Rawls, Bernard Williams, R. M. Hare, and Thomas Nagel. Indeed, all the passages were written by eminent and famous philosophers—or, rather, all but one. At the very bottom there were a couple of lines taken from a letter he had received at some point, which were attributed to "Jeff McMahan, a graduate student." I was, of course, delighted but also incredulous: it was simply unimaginable that the genius who had just written *Reasons and Persons* could have bothered to record a bit of praise from someone as utterly insignificant as I was, a beginning doctoral student who was still years from completing his PhD thesis, and whose status as a graduate student had to be recorded, I assume, so that I could be identified later after I had vanished from memory.

Although Derek may well have consciously adhered to the principle that one ought always to find something nice to say about every philosopher's work, he also had an entirely spontaneous sensitivity and gentleness in his way of expressing criticism. I am confident that it was not calculated when, in a much later email thanking me for sending him the comments I would be presenting on some of his work at a conference devoted to discussing manuscript material that eventually developed into *On What Matters*, he wrote that "I'm glad to say that we don't disagree as much as you think we may." This was his way of saying that I had completely misunderstood his view. He then went on to say that "it's my fault that you thought we disagreed more," on the ground that he had omitted some material in the draft that he had sent me that would have enabled me to understand his view better. (I was not the only one at the subsequent conference who disagreed with Derek less than he or she supposed. Shelly Kagan gave what I thought was a brilliant critique of one of Derek's arguments, only to learn when Derek responded that if he had read a certain passage a bit more carefully, he would have perceived that Derek's actual view was not the one he had criticized. I vividly recall Shelly flinging up his hands with a beaming smile and saying, in his characteristically resonant voice, "Well, Derek, I gave it my best shot!")

In his relations with me when I was his student, Derek was extraordinarily generous, not only in the encouragement he gave me but in various other ways as well. He was, for example, generous with his time. In the early 1980s, after I had ceased officially to be his student, I had some draft material for my thesis that I wanted to discuss with him. I was in North Carolina, preparing to return soon to Cambridge for the start of term. He was already in Princeton,

where he was to teach that semester. He invited me to visit him in Princeton so that we could discuss my work, if I were willing to make the trip. Because I had to leave the country very soon, I was able to be in Princeton for only one day. Since he never got up in the morning before 11:00, he told me to come to the house where he was staying just after 11:00, which I did. As was always the case when I met with Derek, we immediately began to discuss philosophy. The discussion continued without any substantial intermission (he had a pizza delivered for dinner, which we ate while we talked) until 11 p.m. I have never known anyone else who has received or given a twelve-hour graduate supervision (and this, recall, occurred when Derek was no longer my supervisor).[1]

Derek was generous with other people's time and resources as well as with his own. Not long after he had become my supervisor, and thus before I had got to know him well, I told him that I would be unable to meet during a certain short period because both my mother and mother-in-law would be visiting from the US. In a rare instance of willingness to engage in small talk, he inquired what we planned to do while they were in the UK. I replied that, among other things, we planned to visit Cambridge, where at that point I had never been. He remarked that the bus ride to Cambridge was lengthy and tedious and that he regretted that he did not own a car that I could borrow. But inspiration descended and he immediately picked up the phone to call the distinguished philosopher Christopher Peacocke, who at the time was also at All Souls. He knew that Peacocke owned a car and asked him if I could borrow it for a few days. To my amazement, Peacocke consented without demurral, and a few days later I showed up at his residence, met him for the first (and, I think, last) time, and drove away in his car. What neither Derek nor Peacocke knew was that, although I had, of course, driven in the US (as every American does), I had never before driven on the left in the UK, so that Peacocke was quite fortunate to receive his car in unmauled condition a few days later.

Derek was legendary for his generosity in commenting on other people's work. Many important books in moral philosophy contain effusive

[1] David Edmonds notes in his biography that I once had a fourteen-hour supervision with Derek (*Parfit: A Philosopher and His Mission to Save Morality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), p. 244). He is there referring to the meeting in Princeton. The mistake was mine. I thought when I spoke to Edmonds that my meeting with Derek had continued until 1 a.m., but I have subsequently found notes I took at the time that indicate that we adjourned at about 11 p.m.

expressions of gratitude to him. In *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, for example, Samuel Scheffler writes that

> My debt to Derek Parfit is, quite simply, extraordinary. His written comments on several drafts were extremely helpful and led to major improvements at points far too numerous to acknowledge individually. Indeed, his written comments on the penultimate draft were almost as long as that draft itself, and I blush to think of the errors the book would have contained but for his detailed and sensitive criticism. For all of this, and also for his support and encouragement, I am very deeply grateful. In fact, I suspect that only those who have received comparable assistance from him, and they are by no means few in number, will be able to fully appreciate the real extent of my debt.[2]

This book developed from Scheffler's doctoral dissertation at Princeton, where Derek taught as a visiting professor. Very few among even the best teachers ever receive, or deserve, a tribute such as this.

There are countless other testimonies to Derek's generosity in helping others with their work, both in the "Acknowledgements" sections of books and in footnotes in articles crediting those to whom the author is indebted. I will here reproduce one that is not in print but was sent to me by a former student of Derek's, Paul Linton, when he learned that I was planning to write this memoir. Linton reports that, when he had written a draft of his term essay for Derek's postgraduate seminar at NYU, he thought that this draft was rather disappointing.

> This was the first proper philosophy paper I'd ever written, and I went to his office hours to check how I might improve it. He could have given me a few pointers and sent me on my way. But he took 2+ hours to really teach me how to write a philosophical essay, and absolutely transformed my approach (and indeed my grades). I often think, if he hadn't spent those two hours I could have simply continued at roughly the same level for the next two years, thinking I was unavoidably bad at philosophy.[3]

[2] Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism: A Philosophical Investigation of the Considerations Underlying Rival Moral Conceptions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. vii–viii.

[3] Paul Linton, personal communication, email of August 24, 2018.

Derek's response to Linton's request for guidance was entirely characteristic.

In my experience, Derek had little proprietary concern about his ideas and was magnanimous in his acknowledgement of others in his work. What mattered to him was to find the truth, not to be known as the producer of original and important ideas. In a couple of places in his published work, for example, he credits me with ideas that probably emerged in discussions we had and that I cannot confidently say were mine rather than the product of our collaborative thinking. On one occasion, I was surprised to find a footnote in an article by Ronald Dworkin that says, "I owe this last suggestion to Derek Parfit, and through him, I understand, to J. P. Griffin and J. McMahon."[4] So even in discussions with others, Derek was careful to ensure that people got credit for ideas that may have emerged in discussions with him, even if he could not ensure that their names would be correctly spelled in subsequent citations.

Since, in his contribution to this volume, Larry Temkin reports a conflicting experience with Derek's citation practices, I should perhaps note that Derek had very little sense of the distinction between *meum et tuum*. During the periods when he lived in my house in New Jersey, he would occasionally borrow CDs that would somehow find their way into his luggage on his departure and disappear forever into his vast collection in Oxford—though happily on one occasion one of my box sets of the complete symphonies of Sibelius fell out of his carry-on bag onto the floor of the car when I was taking him to the airport. Characteristically, he did not notice when this happened, so I was able to preserve that set without having to embarrass him by identifying it as mine. On many other occasions, he would borrow books of mine that I would later find somewhere or other with the margins littered with the hieroglyphics—in black ballpoint pen—that he used for marking his own books. It simply never occurred to him to wonder whether a book or CD in his possession happened to belong to him or to someone else.

I have claimed that what mattered to Derek was to find the truth. Bertrand Russell was similarly driven. He once wrote, "I suppose that people who are not philosophers don't mind so much when things are puzzling—to me it is intolerable until I understand."[5] My sense is that, for Derek, it was not so much that he could not rest until *he* understood certain matters of importance as that he cared deeply that the truth about these matters *should be*

[4] Ronald Dworkin, "What is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 10 (1981): pp. 185–246, p. 214.

[5] Caroline Moorehead, *Bertrand Russell: A Life* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992), p. 195.

End of Excerpt

[1] https://academic.oup.com/pages/authoring/books/author-reuse-and-self-archiving