

Normativity, Necessity, and the Synthetic a priori

A Response to Derek Parfit

Chris Korsgaard

If I understand him correctly, Derek Parfit's views place us, philosophically speaking, in a very small box. According to Parfit, normativity is an irreducible non-natural property that is independent of the human mind. That is to say, there are normative truths - truths about what we ought to do and to want, or about reasons for doing and wanting things. The truths in question are synthetic a priori truths, and accessible to us only by some sort of rational intuition. Parfit supposes that if we are to preserve the irreducibility of the normative, this is just about all we can say, at least until we bring in some actual intuitions to supply the story with some content.

In contrast, Kant, who gave us the notion of the synthetic a priori, thought that we both must and can pick up the burden of explaining how the synthesis of a judgment can take place a priori. Empirical judgments are synthesized by experience - it is in experience that we find the subject and the predicate to be linked. But the unity of the subject and the predicate in an a priori judgment cannot be explained in that way. They must be joined necessarily. So we must try to produce what Kant called "deductions" of such truths, locating a middle term, essentially connected to both subject and predicate, which serves the function served by experience in the case of empirical judgments: the middle term links the subject and predicate together. So, for instance, in *Groundwork* III, Kant argues that the autonomy which a deliberating rational agent must attribute to himself is also the form of motivation characteristic of a being who is governed by the categorical imperative. Autonomy thus links the deliberating rational agent to being governed by the categorical imperative, and so establishes the connection between that imperative and ourselves.

But Parfit apparently does not think that the synthesis of a synthetic a priori judgment can be established in this way. He thinks we can establish *that* certain very simple synthetic a priori judgments hold by an exercise of rational intuition - judgments like the judgment that pain is to be avoided, for instance. And he thinks we can then reason our way to other synthetic a priori judgments, by the ordinary devices of casuistical reasoning, extending and testing our intuitions by applying them to like cases. But the intuition that tells us *that* the judgment holds explains nothing about the ground of the synthesis, nor on Parfit's view is there really anything to be explained. There are certain things that we ought to do and to want simply because they have the normative property that we ought to do or to want them (or perhaps I should say that they ought to be done or to be wanted). The synthesis between the oughtness and the action, or the agent and the oughtness - however that is supposed to go - cannot be explained. It is like a brute fact, except that it is at the same time an a priori and necessary fact.

Let me put this another way. By "synthetic a priori judgment" we may mean an a priori judgment that is not analytic, or we may mean a judgment that is synthesized a priori. Kant thinks we have to mean both, since a judgment must be synthesized somehow. In Parfit's theory, the intuition that enables us to make the a priori judgment functions like a sense or a seeing. So Parfit's synthetic a priori judgments are exactly like synthetic a posteriori judgments except that the world they represent to us is not the world of experience, but somewhere else. Despite his claim that his sort of realism does not commit him to any kind of Platonism, I think this makes it absolutely clear that it does.

In fact, in a way it is a bit of a mystery why, on Parfit's view, some normative judgments should be regarded as simpler or more basic than others. Suppose I have a faculty of intuition that tells me in a direct and unmediated way that, other things

equal, I ought to avoid pain. Why doesn't that same faculty of intuition tell me in the same direct and unmediated way that, other things equal, I ought to do an act that saves one person's life, spares three people from permanent blindness, and makes seventy-eight people and four dogs unhappy for fourteen months apiece? What is right about both of the actions in question (supposing they are right) is the same - that is, they have the property of rightness - so, morally speaking, the two cases are equally simple. As far as I can tell, according to Parfit, the complicated calculations that would go into deciding on the second of those actions doesn't explain why the action is right, since it makes no sense to ask why an action is right. It is right because it has the property of rightness. We cannot say that an action is right for certain reasons, according to Parfit, since then we could not ask whether it was right to act for those reasons, without triviality. (This is a point I will come back to.) So the considerations that go into the determination of an action's rightness don't seem to explain why the action is right; they seem only to explain how we know that the action is right. But why is it that we get our knowledge of normativity in these two different ways? If our faculty of intuition can spot the property of rightness, why can it spot it only in what *other moral theories* would identify as the simpler cases?

Now I am being unfair. Parfit may respond that the complex considerations do not merely explain how we know which action is right. They constitute its rightness, and it is because rightness is sometimes constituted in complex ways that we reach some conclusions about what we ought to do by reasoning and calculation, while others can be reached by intuition alone. It is true that this sort of point was more troublesome for Parfit's rationalist predecessors than it is for Parfit. Some of them thought that the reason we have a power of rational intuition enabling us to grasp moral truths is that God gave us this power in order to guide us. On that view, the fact we know some moral truths by direct intuition, while others have to be figured out and may remain elusive, raises questions about whether God might have given us a better faculty. Why

not have a reliable intuitive faculty that spots the property of rightness wherever it exists? But Parfit's view cannot give rise to this question, since he offers no reason why we have this power of intuition. I believe he would say that it is simply because we are rational beings, and therefore have the power to grasp the truths of reason. And what is a rational being? According to Parfit, it is a being that has the power to grasp the truths of reason, or more generally to respond to reasons. And now we are in another very small box.

As Parfit points out, it is an analytic truth that to be rational is to respond to reasons (p. 38). But this does not have to mean that the essence of rationality *just is* response to reasons. Nor does it mean that we have to, as it were, identify reasons first, and then define rationality as the power to respond appropriately to those. When people talk about reason, they have three things in mind. In the philosophical tradition, reason is opposed to sense, as the active rather than the passive dimension of the mind. Reason has also traditionally been identified with conformity to certain principles, such as the principles of logical inference, Kant's principles of the understanding, mathematical principles, and the principles of practical reason. Finally, there are the particular considerations, counting in favor of belief or action, that we call "reasons." I take it to be the genius of Kant that he tried to link these things together, by producing arguments intended to show us that what we call "principles of reason" are constitutive of mental activity, and that those principles in turn pick out the kind of considerations that we call "reasons." This is a top-down argument, starting from the notion of mental activity, arguing that certain principles are constitutive of that activity, and then using the principles to identify the particular reasons. One can of course argue the other way, starting from the particular reasons, identifying the principles in terms of them, and then simply stipulating that following those principles counts as mental activity. But this way of linking the three notions does have to end in stipulation, and so can't really throw any light on the notion of mental activity. Another way to put

the point is to say that this strategy reconstructs a mental world in the same way we reconstruct the physical world - from particulars up to principles which are then declared to be laws - and therefore renders the mind a kind of “elsewhere” rather than an active power that interacts with the physical world.

But I am getting much too abstract. I want to approach my worry about Parfit’s conception of the synthetic a priori by another route. Parfit thinks normativity is a property, and this property is known to us by intuition. The intuition functions like a seeing, and there is a normative dimension to human life because we have the power of seeing reasons. Actually, that is wrong. As Parfit thinks of it, there would have been a normative dimension to human life even if we didn’t have the power of seeing reasons, only we would not have seen it. Like our fellow creatures, we would sometimes have reasons, say, to flee from predators, only we would not see those reasons, although we might be moved by fear to flee when we saw the predators. Like the other animals, we are lucky, in that our passions and instincts often tell us to do what we have reason to do. This is not a complete coincidence, or rather, if it is a coincidence it is at a higher level of generality than I just suggested. Our primitive passions and instincts evolved to promote our survival, at least through the reproductive years. Since survival itself is normally good for us, it is not surprising that the dictates of instinct should coincide in a general way with the dictates of normative truth. Normative truths, after all, concern, or spring from, the goodness or badness of certain states of affairs. Since Parfit also acknowledges the normative force of certain contractual and distributive considerations, there may also be normative truths that concern, or spring from, the character of certain actions or human relationships.

Now these kinds of claims about what sorts of things normative truths concern, or spring from, seem like they are just factual claims. They do not follow from the nature of normativity - normativity is not the sort of thing that *has* to govern human

relationships, say. If normativity is an irreducible property, it looks as if there could have been a world in which the only action that had that property was tying your shoelaces on Tuesdays. In fact, it would be especially curious if Derek Parfit, of all people, ended up in this spot. As far as I can see, many of Parfit's own very effective arguments against treating the self as a separately existing entity that survives any amount or kind of change in the person whose self it is, would also apply to this separately existing property of being normative. Just as the property of being Korsgaard, if irreducible to any of my attributes, could be taken out of me and put into Larry Tempkin without anyone noticing the difference, so normativity could, as it were, be taken out of some of my actions and put into others, without anyone - except perhaps an especially eagle-eyed intuiter - noticing the difference. In that case, one feels like saying, in true Parfitian fashion, that normativity would not be what matters. Instead, the stuff that constitutes rightness would be what matters, and it would matter whether it constituted rightness or not.

Parfit may reply that since normativity *just is* mattering, I am flirting with the idea that mattering does not matter, and that doesn't make any sense. But in his sense of mattering, I am not so sure. Perhaps it wouldn't be surprising if it turned out that what matters *to us* is not what matters simpliciter, but rather - well, what matters *to us*. But we can pass over that line of argument, since in any case Parfit denies the implication that the property of normativity could be moved around in the way I have just suggested. As synthetic a priori truths, the truths of morality and reason are *necessary* truths. There could not have been a world, Parfit tells us, in which it was not true that pain is bad. How do we know they are necessary? Well, synthetic a priori truths *are* a species of necessary truths. So when we grasp these truths a priori, we also grasp that they are necessary.

Now in the case of Kant's synthetic a priori truths it is different. What underwrites our conviction that they are necessary is not just *that* we grasp them through reason, or that their necessity is part of what we grasp. Rather, what underwrites our conviction that they are necessary is the way that we grasp them. When I say "the way that we grasp them" I am not referring to a *method* of grasping that we might third-personally ascribe to the one who does the grasping. I was doing that when I said that we grasp them "through reason." Instead, I am referring what we are confronted with, in the first person, when we deduce them. The deduction of the moral law in *Groundwork III* is addressed *to* the first-person deliberating agent. The deliberating agent acts under the idea of freedom in the sense that he finds that he cannot just tell himself that he is determined and cannot help what he does. He is faced with making a choice, and he cannot tell himself that some particular choice is causally forced upon him, for no matter what his view about that is, he still has to make a choice. Since, for reasons I will not try to reproduce here, he also finds that this choice must be governed by law, he has to determine his own conduct in accordance with a self-given law. So he has to act autonomously, that is, in accordance with the categorical imperative. The necessity here is one that he *confronts*: it is essentially first-personal.

That there is this kind of necessity - a necessity we confront - is familiar from thinking about ordinary reasoning. I have sometimes called this "rational necessity." If all women are mortal, and Diotima is a woman, then it is logically necessary that Diotima is mortal. If Diotima believes that all woman are mortal, and Diotima reflects that she is a woman, and the relation between these two propositions is evident to her, then Diotima *must* believe that she is mortal. She is confronted with the necessity of believing in her own mortality. This kind of necessity is not reducible to logical or causal necessity, and cannot be translated without loss into anything third-personally describable. It does not logically follow that Diotima will believe in her own mortality nor is she causally necessitated to do so. We know this is so, for in spite of

the fact that most people are aware of the sorts of premises in question, the belief that we are immortal remains extremely popular. One can be confronted with a necessity and yet not give way. The necessity of conforming to the categorical imperative, according to Kant's account, is like this. The difference is that instead of arising from a commitment to prior premises, like the necessity of Diotima's belief in her mortality, the necessity of acting on the categorical imperative arises directly from the deliberative situation. In either case, this kind of necessity *is normativity*.

In the case of Parfit's synthetic a priori truths, necessity and normativity are not related in this way - at least, I cannot make it out that they are. The only sense in which they confront us with a necessity is that we see *that* they are necessary truths. A person who has the intuitions in question perhaps finds them undeniable, but they are not, like making autonomous choices, *unavoidable*.

A moment ago I said that this kind of normativity cannot be reduced to anything third personal. This is the natural place to do a little growling on my own behalf. In his chapter on normativity, Parfit writes, "Korsgaard's account of normativity is, as she would agree, reductive." (p. 51) Actually, I do not agree to that at all. I believe that we can give a completely naturalistic account of why human beings operate with irreducibly normative concepts. That account does not appeal to the independent existence of any irreducibly normative properties. It appeals to the natural fact of self-consciousness, the need for reasons to which self-consciousness gives rise, and the principles of reason we formulate in response to that need. But I do not believe that normative concepts are reducible to any of those facts, or can be restated without loss in terms of those facts. Someone who says "this is right" does not just mean "I endorse doing this" or, if she does, she means it in a different sense than someone who says "she endorses doing that." The first-person use does not just record a fact about your attitudes. Nor is anything gained, in my view, by saying that the first person use is an

*expression* of your endorsement rather than merely a statement describing your endorsement, since that is still describing the situation from outside. Other people, especially those who don't share your values, may feel inclined to say that that's what you are doing. The normativity is only available and expressible from the first-person standpoint. It matters here to add that this is a standpoint we can occupy together, say when we discuss moral questions.

So what is such a person saying or expressing, and how is it normative? Let me approach this by another route. Parfit rightly observes that I criticize his sort of view for theorizing practical reason (Normativity, p. 22.) Parfit tells us that - I quote - "when we ask most questions, we want to know more about reality." (Naturalism, p. 40) Now I don't think that is true, since I think when we ask practical questions, we want to know how to shape reality - we want to know which actions we should perform, and how to solve certain problems. Parfit thinks that there is a level of reality that gives us the truths about how we should shape reality. No one who believes that there are correct answers to moral questions can deny that there are moral truths, and you can certainly say that such truths constitute part of reality if you want to. So the interesting question here can only be about order - do we solve practical problems by discovering moral truths, or do we arrive at moral truths by solving practical problems. Parfit thinks it has to be the former, but as far as I can see his only reason for believing that is that he believes normativity can only be encountered in intuition. If normativity is encountered in confronting the inescapable solution to an inescapable problem, Parfit is wrong about this.

The agent to whom Kant's argument is addressed is supposed to find himself in just this position: he must decide what to do, and he needs to decide how to decide what to do, and he finds he must do it by willing a universal law. Since the success of that argument is highly contested, however, let me take another. Rawls offers us a

community of agents who have to solve a problem: they must decide how the benefits and burdens of their collective efforts are to be distributed. Call that “the distribution problem.” Specifically, they must decide how to decide this, how to evaluate proposed solutions. Rawls supposes that their situation imposes certain constraints on their decision, say that it must be acceptable to all, that they must have an equal voice in it, and that they will be looking to the fact that each has her own conception of the good that she wishes to pursue. These constraints, Rawls argues, actually yield a solution, just as the constraint that one’s choice must be free, in Kant’s argument, yields a solution.

This brings me back to the issue of triviality. In the naturalism chapter, Parfit discusses a different but parallel moment in Rawls’s work, the theory of rightness as fairness. He quotes Rawls as saying:

“the concept of something’s being right is the same as, or better, may be replaced by, the concept of its being in accordance with the principles that in the original position would be acknowledged to apply to things of this kind.”

Parfit objects to that move, on the grounds that if we replaced “right” with the above formulation, we could not without triviality say that acting on the principles that would be chosen in the original position is right. And that is something we want to say substantially, not as a tautology. If we are only saying that acting on the principles that would be chosen is acting on the principles that would be chosen, we are not only saying something boring, but worse, we are saying something obviously non-normative.

In fact, however, earlier in the *Theory of Justice*, Rawls has suggested a better way to go at this issue. He distinguished the concept of justice from a conception of justice. The

concept of justice can be seen as a functional concept. It then refers to “whatever solves the distribution problem.” What Rawls offers us is a conception of justice, a view about what solves that problem. When this is in place, Rawls can have it both ways: we can for most purposes replace “just” with “in accordance with the two principles that would be chosen in the original position.” But we can still assert, substantially, that conforming to those two principles is just. What we mean then is that conforming to them is what solves the distribution problem. The same sort of move can be made for “right” - it is a functional concept, referring to whatever solves a certain problem, roughly, the problem of what to do, and of how to decide what to do. And if I want to say that acting in accordance with the categorical imperative is right, I can say that - meaning roughly that that is what solves the problem of what to do. In the mouth of someone who is deeply in the grip of that problem such a statement is, I believe, normative. Rawls’s concept/conception schema also solves another problem that Parfit worries about - the problem of what people with different accounts of rightness can possibly be disagreeing about, given that they seem to understand rightness in different ways. The answer is that they are disagreeing about what solves the problem of what to do.

The positive point of these reflections has been to suggest that Kantian theories offer us a way of accounting for normativity that is neither reductive nor dependent on the existence of non-natural properties. The critical point has been to suggest that Parfit fails to fully grasp this option, because he is operating with an essentially Humean conception of the mind - a passive or even visualistic conception. What suggests this to me most forcefully is the way that Parfit assimilates the synthetic a priori to the synthetic a posteriori, making the difference between them seem only to be a matter of where we are looking. The unity of synthetic a priori judgments, like the unity of the self, requires an explanation, and so long as the judging self is conceived as passive in the face of that unity, they are like judgments of experience. Obviously one cannot

make good on such large claims in a comment of this length, but until Parfit provides some story about how these a priori normative judgments are synthesized, I cannot see any other way to understand what he says.