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HOW TO BE GOOD

An Oxford philosopher thinks he can distill all morality into a formula. Is he right?

BY LARISSA MACFARQUHAR



*Derek Parfit has
few memories of his
past and almost
never thinks about
it, a fact that he
attributes to an
inability to form
mental images.
Photograph by Steve
Pyke.*

GETTY

What
makes me the
same person
throughout
my life, and a
different
person from
you? And
what is the
importance of
these facts?

I believe
that most of
us have false
beliefs about
our own
nature, and
our identity
over time, and
that, when we
see the truth,
we ought to
change some
of our beliefs

| about what we
have reason to
do.

You are in a terrible accident. Your body is fatally injured, as are the brains of your two identical-triplet brothers. Your brain is divided into two halves, and into each brother's body one half is successfully transplanted. After the surgery, each of the two resulting people believes himself to be you, seems to remember living your life, and has your character. (This is not as unlikely as it sounds: already, living brains have been surgically divided, resulting in two separate streams of consciousness.) What has happened? Have you died, or have you survived? And if you have survived who are you? Are you one of these people? Both? Or neither? What if one of the

transplants fails, and only one person with half your brain survives? That seems quite different—but but the death of one person could hardly make a difference to the identity of another.

The philosopher Derek Parfit believes that neither of the people is you, but that this doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that you have ceased to exist, because what has happened to you is quite unlike ordinary death: in your relationship to the two new people there is everything that matters in ordinary survival—a continuity of memories and dispositions that will decay and change as they usually do. Most of us care about our future because it is *ours*—but this most fundamental human instinct is based on a mistake, Parfit believes. Personal identity is not what matters.

Parfit is thought by many to be the most original moral philosopher in the English-speaking world. He has written two books, both of which have been called the most important works to be written in the field in more than a century—since 1874, when Henry Sidgwick’s “The Method of Ethics,” the apogee of classical utilitarianism, was published. Parfit’s first book, “Reasons and Persons,” was published in 1984, when he was forty-one, and caused a sensation. The book was dense with science-fictional thought experiments, all urging a shift toward a more impersonal, non-physical, and selfless view of human life.

Suppose that a scientist were to begin replacing your cells, one by one, with those of Greta Garbo at the age of thirty.

At the beginning of the experiment, the recipient of the cells would clearly be you, and at the end it would clearly be Garbo, but what about in the middle? It seems implausible to suggest that you could draw a line between the two—that any single cell could make all the difference between you and not-you. There is, then, no answer to the question of whether or not the person is you, and yet there is no mystery involved—we know what happened. A self, it seems, is not all or nothing but the sort of thing that there can be more of or less of. When, in the process of a zygote's cellular self-multiplication, does a person start to exist? Or when does a person, descending into dementia or coma, cease to be? There is no simple answer—it is a matter of degrees.

Parfit's view resembles in some ways the Buddhist view of the self, a fact that was pointed out to him years ago by a professor of Oriental religions. Parfit was delighted by this discovery. He is in the business of searching for universal truths, so to find out that a figure like the Buddha, vastly removed from him by time and space, came independently to a similar conclusion—well, that was extremely reassuring. (Sometime later, he learned that “Reasons and Persons” was being memorized and chanted, along with sutras, by novice monks at a monastery in Tibet.) It is difficult to believe that there is no such thing as an all-or-nothing self—no “deep further fact” beyond the multitude of small psychological facts that make you who you are. Parfit finds that his own belief is unstable—he

needs to re-convince
himself. Buddha, too,
thought that achieving
this belief was very hard,
though possible with
much meditation. But,
assuming that we could be
convinced, how should we
think about it?

Is the truth
depressing?
Some may
find it so. But
I find it
liberating, and
consoling.

(Parfit's words, in his
books, in e-mails, and
even in speech, all have a
similar timbre—it is
difficult to distinguish
them. In all, a strong
emotion is audible under
restraint.)


When I
believed that
my existence
was such a
further fact, I
seemed
imprisoned in

myself. My life
seemed like a
glass tunnel,
through which
I was moving
faster every
year, and at
the end of
which there
was darkness.

When I
changed my
view, the walls
of my glass
tunnel
disappeared. I
now live in the
open air.

There is still a
difference
between my
life and the
lives of other
people. But
the difference
is less. Other
people are
closer. I am
less concerned
about the rest
of my own life,
and more
concerned
about the lives
of others.


It seems to a friend of Parfit's that his theory of personal identity is motivated by an extreme fear of death. But Parfit doesn't believe that he once feared death more than other people, and now he thinks he fears it less.



My death
will break the
more direct
relations
between my
present
experiences
and future
experiences,
but it will not
break various
other
relations.

Some people will remember him. Others may be influenced by his writing, or act upon his advice. Memories that connect with his memories, thoughts that connect with his thoughts, actions taken that connect

with his intentions, will
persist after he is gone,
just inside different
bodies.



This is all
there is to the
fact that there
will be no one
living who will
be me. Now
that I have
seen this, my
death seems to
me less bad.

After Parfit finished
“Reasons and Persons,” he
became increasingly
disturbed by how many
people believed that there
was no such thing as
objective moral truth.
This led him to write his
second book, “On What
Matters,” which was
published this summer,
after years of anticipation
among philosophers. (A
conference, a book of
critical essays, and endless
discussions about it
preceded its appearance,

based on circulated drafts.) Parfit believes that there are true answers to moral questions, just as there are to mathematical ones. Humans can perceive these truths, through a combination of intuition and critical reasoning, but they remain true whether humans perceive them or not. He believes that there is nothing more urgent for him to do in his brief time on earth than discover what these truths are and persuade others of their reality. He believes that without moral truth the world would be a bleak place in which nothing mattered. This thought horrifies him.

We would
have no
reasons to try
to decide how
to live. Such
decisions
would be
arbitrary. . . .
We would act
only on our
instincts and
desires, living
as other
animals live.

He feels himself
surrounded by dangerous
skeptics. Many of his
colleagues not only do not
believe in objective moral
truth—they don't even
find its absence
disturbing. They are
pragmatic types who
argue that the notion of
moral truth is
unnecessary, a fifth wheel:
with it or without it,
people will go on with
their lives as they have
always done, feeling
strongly that some things
are bad and others good,

not missing the cosmic
imprimatur. To Parfit, this
is an appalling nihilism.

Subjectivists
sometimes say
that, even
though
nothing
matters in an
objective
sense, it is
enough that
some things
matter to
people. But
that shows
how deeply
these views
differ.

Subjectivists
are like those
who say, "God
doesn't exist in
your sense, but
God is love,
and some
people love
each other, so
in *my* sense
God exists."

Parfit is an atheist, but
when it comes to moral
truth he believes what

Ivan Karamazov believed about God: if it does not exist, then everything is permitted.

In the way that he moves and carries himself, Parfit gives the impression of one who is unaware of being looked at, perhaps because he spends so much time alone. He clutches his computer bag. He fidgets. His hair is white and fluffy and has settled into a pageboy of the kind that was fashionable for men in the fifteenth century. He wears the same outfit every day: white shirt, black trousers.

There is something not-there about him, an unphysical, slightly androgynous quality. He lacks the normal anti-social emotions—envy, malice, dominance, desire for revenge. He doesn't believe that his conscious

mind is responsible for the important parts of his work. He pictures his thinking self as a government minister sitting behind a large desk, who writes a question on a piece of paper and puts it in his out-tray. The minister then sits idly at the desk, twiddling his thumbs, while in some back room civil servants labor furiously, come up with the answer, and place it in his in-tray. Parfit is less aware than most of the boundaries of his self—less conscious of them and less protective. He is helplessly, sometimes unwillingly, empathetic: he will find himself overcome by the mood of the person he is with, especially if that person is unhappy.

He has few memories of his past, and he almost never thinks about it, although his memory for

other things is very good. He attributes this to his inability to form mental images. Although he recognizes familiar things when he sees them, he cannot call up images of them afterward in his head: he cannot visualize even so simple an image as a flag; he cannot, when he is away, recall his wife's face. (This condition is rare but not unheard of; it has been proposed that it is more common in people who think in abstractions.) He has always believed that this is why he never thinks about his childhood. He imagines other people, in quiet moments, playing their memories in their heads like wonderful old movies, whereas his few memories are stored as propositions, as sentences, with none of the vividness of a picture. But, when it is suggested to him that an absence of images does

not really explain an absence of emotional connection to his past, he concedes that this is so.

Parfit's mother, Jessie, was born in India to two medical missionaries. She grew up to study medicine—she was a brilliant student and won many prizes. She joined the Oxford Group, a Christian movement, founded in the nineteen-twenties, whose members strove to adhere to the Four Absolutes: absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love. Through the Oxford Group, she met Norman Parfit, the son of an Anglican clergyman, who was also studying to be a doctor. Norman was a bad student, but he was funny and gregarious and principled—he was a pacifist and a teetotaller. After he received the

group's permission to propose, he and Jessie married.

In 1935, soon after they became doctors, Norman and Jessie moved to western China to teach preventive medicine in missionary hospitals. Before they were able to begin work, they were required to spend a couple of years in the mountains studying Chinese. Jessie picked it up easily, but Norman simply could not learn the language, however hard he tried, and he despaired over his failure. Their first child, Theodora, was born in 1939, and their second, Derek, in 1942. Norman was drawn to Mao's idealist ardor. He didn't become a Communist, exactly, but he abandoned the conservative political views with which he was brought up. More significantly, both Norman and Jessie lost

their faith. They disliked some of their fellow-missionaries, some of whom were quite racist, and they were struck by the irrelevance of Christianity to a sophisticated culture like China's. Jessie shed her faith easily—she associated Christianity with the oppressive puritanism of her upbringing, and found purpose enough in public health. But Norman's loss of faith was a catastrophe. Without God, his life had no meaning. He sank into a chronic depression that lasted until his death.

About a year after Derek was born, the family left China. They settled in Oxford, and had a third child, Joanna. When Derek was seven, he became religious and decided to be a monk. He prayed all the time and tried vainly to persuade his parents to go to

church. But at eight he
lost his faith: he decided
that a good God would
not send people to Hell,
and so if his teachers were
wrong about God's
goodness they must also
be wrong about God's
existence. His argument
was flawed but convincing
—he never believed in
God again.

Jessie and Norman had
little in common and grew
unhappy together, but
they stayed married. Jessie
took a second degree,
became a psychiatrist, and
ended up running
London's services for
emotionally disturbed
children. Norman worked
at a low-level public-
health job near Oxford.
He was concerned about
cancer and fluoridation,
but he was too ineffectual
to do much about either.

My father
was a
perfectionist,

who achieved
little. He
labored for
several weeks
each year to
write his
Annual
Report, whose
text he
continually
revised. My
mother would
have written
such a report
in an hour or
two. Though
he was, in
some ways, an
intellectual, to
whom moral
and religious
ideas mattered
greatly, I
believe that he
read, as an
adult, only two
books:
Thackeray's
"Henry
Esmond,"
which he was
given, and
"Away with
All Pests,"
which
described a

successful
Chinese
campaign to
destroy
disease-
carrying flies.

All three children were
sent to boarding school
when they were young, so
they didn't know each
other very well.

I remember
becoming
aware that, for
most children,
home was
where they
lived, and not
merely, as it
was for me, a
place that I
visited for
brief
interruptions
to my main
life that was
lived at
school.

Theodora and Derek were
brilliant students, like
their mother. Derek was

sent to Eton, where he came first in every subject except mathematics.

Joanna, like her father, was bad at everything.

Her teeth stuck out. She was also much too tall—six feet at the age of eleven. When the family was together, it was awful—Norman was angry almost all the time. He often didn't understand what his wife and elder children were talking about, and this made him feel inferior. He had a narrow life. He took refuge in two hobbies—tennis, which he didn't play well, and stamp collecting, on which he spent several hours each evening. Parfit emerged from his childhood with the understanding that he and his mother and Theo were lucky and would live full lives, while Norman and Joanna were unlucky and would never be happy. For the rest of his life, his

father and his younger
sister represented for him
everything that horrified
him about suffering and
unfairness.

I was not, I
believe, badly
affected by my
father's
depression. I
was merely
very sorry for
him. That is
because I was
never closely
related to him.
He wasn't
good at
interacting
with children.
Before I left
for my years as
a Harkness
Fellow in the
U.S., I noticed
tears in my
father's eyes
when he said
goodbye to
me. That
moved me
greatly at the
time, and I
find tears in
my eyes as I

type this
sentence. That
was the only
time in which
I had some
sense of the
love that my
father, in his
depressed and
inarticulate
way, felt for
me.

In the early summer of
1961, Parfit, aged
eighteen, travelled to
New York. He was nearly
turned down for a visa—
the immigration officer
saw that he was born in
China and told him the
Chinese quota was already
full. He protested that he
was British; the officer
consulted with a colleague
and informed him that he
would get a visa since he
was the sort of Chinese
person they liked. He
went to work at *The New
Yorker*, as a researcher for
The Talk of the Town. He
stayed in a splendid high-

ceilinged apartment on
the Upper West Side with
his sister Theo and several
of her friends from
Oxford—mostly
returning Rhodes
scholars. He brimmed
with enthusiasms and
self-confidence and issued
pronouncements on all
sorts of subjects, which
amused some of the
Rhodes scholars and
irritated others.

He loved jazz, and went
often to hear Miles Davis
and Thelonious Monk.
He had always loved
music, but he couldn't play
an instrument, because he
couldn't read the notes—
he could slowly work
them out, but not with
any fluency. He
hypothesized that there
was some relationship
between his inability to
read music and his
deficiencies at
mathematics: he was not
good at processing
symbols.

He had wanted to be a poet since he was nine or ten. He published one poem, “Photograph of a Comtesse,” in *The New Yorker* the year after he worked there, and several in the Eton College *Chronicle*.

...A
fierce tug on
the line
 Jerked you
back. You
pulled at once
—leaping
between
 Delight and
horror that the
line you
wound
 Was tearing
a pointed
hook through
flesh. . . .
 You held
the fish,
 Then
lashed it
savagely
against the
deck
 And threw
the battered
pulp far out to
sea. . . .
 With
sickness in
your throat
you went
below
 And lay
half-sick till
port.

He spent months laboring
on his poetry, but he
developed an obsession
with the idea that not
only should the lines of a
poem rhyme but the
words within each line
should have internal
assonances, with repeated
patterns of consonants or
vowels, as is the case in
some Anglo-Saxon and
German poetry. But it was
so difficult to find words
that had both the right
sound and the right sense
that he found he could no
longer finish a poem. His
obsession became crazier
and more crippling. Now
when he read his favorite
poets—Shakespeare,
Keats, Tennyson—their
poems seemed to him
badly flawed, because they
had too few internal
assonances. He
understood that this was
insane, but he couldn't
help it. Eventually, he

realized that he stood no chance of becoming a good poet and gave up.

In the autumn of 1961, he went up to Oxford to read history. (He studied Modern History at Eton, which for England began when the Romans left, in 410.) He was a little bored by the subject, and briefly considered switching to P.P.E.—Philosophy, Politics and Economics. He was apprehensive about the mathematics that economics would involve, however, so he read a few pages of a textbook and came across a symbol he didn't recognize—a line with a dot above and a dot below. He asked someone to explain it, and when he was told that it was a division sign he felt so humiliated that he decided to stick with history. After Oxford, he

went back to America for two years on a Harkness Fellowship.

He decided to study philosophy. He attended a lecture by a Continental philosopher that addressed some important subject such as suicide or the meaning of life, but he couldn't understand any of it. He went to hear an analytic philosopher who spoke on a trivial topic but was quite lucid. He wondered whether it was more likely that Continental philosophers would become more lucid or analytic philosophers less trivial. He decided that the second was more likely, and returned to Oxford. Almost at once, he achieved a dazzling success: he took an exam and won a Prize Fellowship at All Souls, which entitled him to room and board at the college for seven years, with no teaching duties.

He studied with A. J. Ayer, Peter Strawson, and David Pears. He was electrified by the belligerence of philosophers—historians were much milder—although he worried that his delight was inconsistent with his disapproval of other pugilistic sports, such as boxing.

He moved into rooms at All Souls and settled into a monk-like existence. There was usually a woman in his life somewhere, but he spent very little time with her. Almost all his waking hours were spent at his desk. All Souls resembles a monastery. Its fifteenth-century stone arcades surround a vivid lawn that is immaculate because it is seldom used: All Souls has no undergraduates and is not often open to the public—its gates are shut. All his needs were

taken care of by the
college: he was housed,
fed, and paid, and nothing
in the way of emotional
output was required of
him. This was how his life
had been since he went to
boarding school, at ten,
and it suited him. He had
become, he realized, what
psychiatrists call
institutionalized—a
person for whom living in
an institution feels more
normal than living in a
family. The only thing
that interfered with his
work was a lack of sleep.
He suffered from terrible
insomnia—when he went
to bed his brain kept
racing, and there were
many days when he was
too exhausted to work.
But when he was in his
mid-thirties his doctor
prescribed a tricyclic
antidepressant,
Amitriptyline, with
which, along with a very

large quantity of vodka, he could force himself into unconsciousness.

Sometime after he gave up the idea of being a poet, Parfit developed a new aesthetic obsession: photography. He drifted into it—a rich uncle gave him an expensive camera—but later it occurred to him that his interest in committing to paper images of things he had seen might stem from his inability to hold those images in his mind. He also believed that most of the world looked better in reproduction than it did in life. There were only about ten things in the world he wanted to photograph, however, and they were all buildings: the best buildings in Venice—Palladio's two churches, the Doge's Palace, the buildings along the Grand Canal—and the best buildings in

St. Petersburg, the Winter
Palace and the General
Staff Building.

I find it
puzzling how
much I, and
some other
people, love
architecture.
Most of the
buildings that
I love have
pillars, either
classical or
Gothic. There
is a nice
dismissive
word that
applies to all
other
buildings:
“astylar.” I also
love the
avenues in the
French
countryside,
perhaps
because the
trees are like
rows of pillars.
(There were
eight million
trees in
French
avenues in

1900, and now
there are only
about three
hundred
thousand.)

There are
some astylar
buildings that
I love, such as
some
skyscrapers.

The best
buildings in
Venice and St.
Petersburg,
though very
beautiful, are
not sublime.

What is
sublime, I
remember
hearing
Kenneth
Clark say, are
only the
interiors of
some late
Gothic
cathedrals, and
some
American
skyscrapers.

Although he admired some skyscrapers, he believed that architecture had generally declined since 1840, and the world had grown uglier. On the other hand, anesthetics were discovered around the same time, so the world's suffering had been greatly reduced. Was the trade-off worth it? He was not sure.

He believed that he had little native talent for photography, but that by working hard at it he would be able to produce, in his lifetime, a few good pictures. Between 1975 and 1998, he spent about five weeks each year in Venice and St. Petersburg.

I may be
somewhat
unusual in the
fact that I
never get tired
or sated with
what I love
most, so that I
don't need or
want variety.

He disliked overhead
lights, in which category
he included the midday
sun, but he loved the
horizontal rays at the two
ends of the day. He waited
for hours, reading a book,
for the right sort of light
and the right sort of
weather.

When he came home, he
developed his
photographs and sorted
them. Of a thousand
pictures, he might keep
three. When he decided
that a picture was worth
saving, he took it to a
professional processor in
London and had the
processor hand-paint out

all aspects of the image
that he found distasteful,
which meant all evidence
of the twentieth century
—cars, telegraph wires,
signposts—and usually all
people. Then he had the
colors repeatedly adjusted,
although this was
enormously expensive,
until they were exactly
what he wanted—which
was a matter of fidelity
not to the scene as it was
but to an idea in his head.

Other than his trips to
Venice and St. Petersburg,
the only reason he left All
Souls for any length of
time was to travel to
America, to teach. He had
appointments at Harvard,
Rutgers, and N.Y.U.: he
wanted students, because
he found that it was
discouragingly difficult to
persuade older
philosophers to change
their minds. He also
needed students, because
only they would talk
philosophy with him for

twelve hours at a stretch
and then wake up the
next day wanting to do it
again. Older philosophers
(and his students from
past years were now in
this category) had
children and spouses; they
sat on academic
committees and
barbecued in their back
yards. Only he stayed the
same—as fervently single-
minded as they were, too,
when they were young.
When he found a bright
new student to mentor, he
devoted hours to reading
his work and writing
comments. (He did this
for many colleagues as
well: he read with
astonishing speed, and
would often return a
manuscript with densely
argued comments that
were longer than the
manuscript itself, even if
the manuscript was a
book.)

When he was in America,
he was compelled to
procure his own food.
Because he didn't want to
waste time on choice or
preparation, he developed
rigid routines that he
could follow without
thinking. For years,
according to a colleague,
he made the same meal
every morning for
breakfast, which he
conceived of as a recipe
for maximum health:
sausage links, green
peppers, yogurt, and a
banana, all in one bowl.
One day, the colleague's
nutritionist wife explained
to him that this was not a
particularly healthy meal,
and suggested a better
meal; the next day he
switched to the new meal
and never varied it.

He was always conscious
of how little time he had.
When he had to go from
one building to another
on a big American
campus, he ran. But his

routines were not just about time-saving: he found himself constantly returning to the same thoughts, philosophical and otherwise—that was just the way his mind worked. “At one point, I spent a year at Harvard when he was visiting there and we would go out to dinner,” Larry Temkin, a philosopher and former student of his, says. “We went to the same place, a Thai restaurant, every time, and every time he would order some curry and I would order something that had pineapples and rice and cashews. And every time he’d say, ‘Larry, isn’t that boring, don’t you want some of my curry?’ I’d say, ‘No, Derek, I don’t like curry, it’s too spicy for me.’ And then the next week we’d go to the same restaurant, and he would order the same meal, and I would order the same

meal, and he'd say, 'Larry, isn't that boring, don't you want some of this?' And I'd say, 'No, Derek, I really don't, you like the curries, but they're too spicy for me.' And the next week the same thing would happen again. It was like 'Groundhog Day.'"

Theo Parfit married an American, settled outside Washington, D.C., and had three children. She studied social work and became an expert on families. She wrote about how to hold families together in a crisis, and about ways to involve families in the education of their children. Although she lived far away, she kept in touch with her parents and siblings and cousins. She tried to see her brother when he came to the East Coast, as he frequently did, to teach, but usually he didn't call. He didn't do

this to avoid her—it simply didn't occur to him, because he was thinking about philosophy. She knew this, and tried not to feel hurt. When they did see each other, he was very friendly.

Parfit lived near his parents in Oxford, and saw them once a week, for Sunday lunch. His mother read up on philosophy to try to understand his work, but since Parfit saw her only with his father they couldn't talk much about it. His father was baffled by him; he couldn't understand why he became a philosopher—he thought he ought to have been a scientist. He tried, unsuccessfully, to interest his son in tennis.

Joanna struggled to find work. Finally, she managed to qualify as a nanny. She became pregnant and had a son, Tom, whom she raised on

her own. A few years later,
she adopted a daughter.
She loved her children,
but they didn't make her
happy. Every few months,
she telephoned Parfit to
talk to him about how
depressed she was and
how badly things were
going. He dreaded those
calls. Then, in her thirties,
she died in a car crash.

She had not made a will,
and after she died there
was a harrowing fight
over her son. Her
daughter was re-adopted
quickly, but Jessie was
determined that Tom
should be placed in a
family she knew. The
trouble was, his placement
was in the hands of the
local council, and Jessie so
antagonized the council
with her uncompromising
opinions and her upper-
middle-class accent that it
sought actively to thwart
her. Jessie was in agony,
and Parfit became very
emotionally involved. The

case ended up in court,
and he wrote a long and
passionate brief
supporting his mother. At
last, the case was resolved
in their favor. Jessie died
soon afterward, although
she was not sick or
particularly old. Once
Tom was safely placed
with his new family,
nearby, Parfit never saw
him.

As the years went by,
Theo came to accept that
although her brother
loved her, it was simply
not important to him to
spend time with his
family. He was extremely
softhearted, and she knew
that in a crisis he would
always help her, but
deepening ties to his past
through continuity,
valuing blood as a source
of kinship—these were
just not part of who he
was. Years later, Parfit
wrote to her in a letter
that they had reacted to
their unhappy family in

opposite ways. They were like the Rhine and the Danube: they begin very close, but then they diverge—one flows to the Atlantic, the other to the Black Sea.

Sometime around 1982 or '83, the philosopher Janet Radcliffe Richards moved from London to Oxford, having ended her first marriage. She had become well known a few years earlier for writing “The Skeptical Feminist,” a fierce attack on anti-rational tendencies in the women’s movement, and was teaching philosophy of science at the Open University. She was very beautiful and very feminine. She attended a seminar that Parfit was teaching. She had never encountered anyone like him: he was obviously a strange person, but not in any of the usual ways. Afterward, Amartya Sen,

a friend, who was co-teaching the seminar, greeted her, and, when she left, Parfit asked Sen who she was.

D.P.: I read some of Sam Scheffler's recent work and he's arguing that people care about the future of humanity much more than they realize. And I think that's right, actually.

J.R.R.: The Future of Humanity Institute people keep talking about engineering humans to make them more moral. I haven't got a clear enough view of what it would be, because it

would have to
be something
so different
from humans
that I'm not
sure why
bother, any
more than
turn
everybody into
termites or
something.

D.P.: Oh
no! You could
—

J.R.R.: The
essence of us
is that the
things we
value are close
connections
and families
and groups,
and that
necessarily
means that we
care about
other people
less.

At the time, Parfit was
preparing the manuscript
of “Reasons and Persons”
for the printer. This
involved a certain amount

of anxiety, but the enormous intellectual labor that had consumed him for fifteen years was over. He was entering a rare transitional moment, between decades-long periods of total philosophical immersion, in which his mind was, for a short time, receptive to other things.

Parfit read Richards's book and wrote her a letter about it, suggesting that they meet and discuss it further. He went out and bought three identical black suits. They met. He offered to rent her a computer. (He had just discovered computers—he had bought one secondhand and was very excited about it.) With unpracticed but single-minded diligence, he pursued her.

She was bewildered. An eminent philosopher had sent her a letter that in

tone and content resembled an academic article, and now he was offering to rent her a computer. How much did it cost to rent a computer? He had not named an amount. He certainly seemed very interested in talking with her, and he was charming and brilliant and unexpectedly good-looking, but what was he up to? He never flirted—he talked to her exactly as he would talk to a man. After a time, she deduced from the sheer frequency of his attentions that his interest must be romantic, but this was not apparent in his behavior. She began to wonder if he would propose to her before they had kissed.

D.P.: I
think there's
great scope for
change, even

with no
genetic
changes.

J.R.R.: Oh,
I wasn't
talking about
with no
genetic
changes, I was
talking about
the genetic
ones they were
talking about.
Of course
there's scope
for change,
but the
question is
how much
they're going
to work with
the material
we've got, and
how much
they're going
to change it—
and they want
to change it *a
lot*. You could
see there could
be a society of
some kind of
being that
lived in perfect

harmony, but I
can't quite see
the point.

D.P.: Well,
Nick Bostrom
said that it's
no good
having moral
intelligent
robots if
they're not
conscious, so
he is aware
that you have
to make sure
they're
conscious.

J.R.R.: I
suppose I just
have trouble
thinking that
there is a
point in
having things
exist if they
aren't things
that are
wanted by
things that
already
happen to
exist. I can't
see the point
of bringing
anything into
existence out

of nothing. I
don't see why
the world is
better with
creatures in it
than not,
especially as
there's so
much
suffering.

Richards didn't realize
how unusual this
transitional moment was
in Parfit's life. Soon,
having won her, Parfit
burrowed back into his
work. At first, this was
fine—she didn't want a
man around all the time
—but then they decided
to buy a house together.
They had intended to
look in Oxford, but Parfit
lost his heart to a
beautiful eighteenth-
century house near
Avebury, a Neolithic
henge monument in
Wiltshire. He had to have
it—he bid the price up
and was terribly anxious
until the deed was signed.

Then, happy to have won his house, he sat in his study with the blinds down. Ten minutes away, there was a glorious bluebell wood, and he loved bluebell woods—one of his fears about global warming was that it would get too hot for bluebells—but Richards couldn't get him to go there. It existed: that was enough. Eventually, she realized that her need for human company, modest as it was, was greater than he was capable of meeting. They sold the house, she bought a house in London, and he went back to his rooms in All Souls. From then until he retired, more than ten years later, they spent very little time together, although they spoke on the phone several times a day.

Around the mid-nineties, Parfit started reading Kant. He hadn't read him seriously before because he had always found him irritating—his appalling sentences (it was Kant, he felt, who had made really bad writing philosophically acceptable), his grandiloquence, his infuriating inconsistencies and glaring mistakes. He felt that the crucial Kantian idea of autonomy, for instance, was just a blatant cheat: Kant wanted there to be a universally valid moral law, and he wanted every person to have the moral autonomy to determine the law for himself, and he just couldn't accept that you couldn't have both those things at once.

I asked a
Kantian,
“Does this

mean that, if I
don't give
myself Kant's
Imperative as
a law, I am not
subject to it?"
"No," I was
told, "you have
to give
yourself a law,
and there's
only one law."
This reply was
maddening,
like the
propaganda of
the so-called
People's
Democracies
of the old
Soviet bloc, in
which voting
was
compulsory
and there was
only one
candidate.
And when I
said "But I
haven't given
myself Kant's
Imperative as
a law," I was
told "Yes you
have."

Things that mattered enormously to Kant—moral autonomy, motive—didn't seem that important to Parfit. He thought that individual selves were less significant than other people thought they were, so he wasn't that interested in motive; he thought that moral truths existed independently of human will, so he wasn't going to place much value on autonomy in Kant's sense. The driving force behind Parfit's moral concern was suffering. He couldn't bear to see someone suffer—even thinking about suffering in the abstract could make him cry. He believed that no one, not even a monster like Hitler, could deserve to suffer at all. (He realized that there were practical reasons to lock such people up, but that was a different issue.)

Parfit's first love in moral philosophy was someone completely unlike Kant—Henry Sidgwick, the British consequentialist, best known for “The Methods of Ethics.”

Sidgwick was very boring. He was so boring that he even considered himself boring. He was boring because he was very, very thorough. He would hedge each claim with so many potential rebuttals, and counter-rebuttals, and counter-counter-rebuttals, that a reader was apt either to throw the book down in exasperation or to become so muddled in the jostling of hypothetical interlocutors that he had no idea what he was supposed to think. Sidgwick realized this, but he felt that it was more important to be careful than to be exciting, and that whatever value his work possessed depended on that care. He was a modest man. Kant wrote

of his “Critique” that it “rests on a fully secured foundation, established forever; it will prove to be indispensable too for the noblest ends of mankind in all future ages”; Sidgwick wrote of his “Methods” that it “solves nothing, but may clear up the ideas of one or two people, a little.” But though there were other philosophers more original and more brilliant, Parfit felt that Sidgwick’s “Methods,” in its precise, dull way, captured more important truths about morality than any other book ever written. It was not surprising to him that a plodder like Sidgwick should write a better book than a genius like Plato or Kant, since he believed that philosophy was like science—over time, it made progress.

As he read deeper and deeper into Kant, he began to feel that the grandiloquence and inconsistency that had irritated him in the past were the product of an emotional nature so passionately extreme that it was simply incapable of Sidgwick's careful self-criticism. For Kant, something was never just good, it was *necessary*; there was little "most" or "some" in Kant, only "all" or "none." Parfit recognized that he, too, was an emotional extremist who found it difficult to accept answers that fell between everything and nothing. But as he began to appreciate Kant—he came to believe that Kant was the greatest moral philosopher since the ancient Greeks—he began to be more and more troubled by the ways in which Kant diverged from Sidgwick, and by the way

that modern Kantians
disagreed with modern
consequentialists and both
disagreed with
contractualists. Kantians
thought that you should
act according to
categorical moral
principles that you believe
ought to be followed by
everyone; you should not
lie, for instance, even if a
murderer asks you to tell
him where your friend is,
so he can kill him. The
important thing is to do
your duty, whatever
happens as a result. But
consequentialists believed
that results—
consequences—were
everything: what was
important was not motive
or adherence to rules but
bringing about as much
good as possible.
Contractualists believed
that the crucial thing was
consent: the way to figure
out what to do was to
imagine the principles to
which nobody could

reasonably object. The trick was to arrange the thought experiment so the consent wasn't the kind of pseudo consent that had so irritated Parfit in Kant—it had to be the consent of plausibly self-interested people, not rational ghosts.

There were brilliant philosophers of good faith in all three camps, he knew, so why were their disagreements so intractable? If philosophers just as clever and well versed as he was disagreed with him, how could he be sure he was right? What if he could prove that their differences were only an illusion of perspective—that at a certain point all three approaches converged, like climbers scaling different sides of a mountain and meeting at the summit? Then he would be able to feel much more confident in

his conviction that moral truths existed and it was possible to discover them.

In 2002, he gave the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at U.C. Berkeley, proposing an early draft of his solution. He began circulating a book manuscript titled “Climbing the Mountain.”

One of his moves was to point out the problems with so-called “act consequentialism” as opposed to “rule consequentialism.” Act consequentialists were purists: they believed that each action should be considered on its own merits, with the one simple idea of increasing well-being. But not only did this pose the considerable practical problem that most people would likely be pretty bad at anticipating the consequences of their actions; it would also make social life virtually

impossible. It might make sense to lie to a murderer, but if there were no rules about lying it would be difficult to trust anyone—even the lie to the murderer would be ineffective. Similarly, it might in one case seem right for a mother to sacrifice her child so that ten strangers could live, but a society in which mothers were always eager to sacrifice their children for strangers would be dreadful, so better to have a rule favoring maternal love and let the occasional stranger perish.

Parfit's main task, however, was to prove that Kantianism and rule consequentialism were not actually in conflict. To do this, he needed to perform surgery on Kant's Formula of Universal Law, the formula that Kant had claimed to be the supreme principle of morality: "I ought never

to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.” Many Kantians had given up on this formula (Kant had many others), concluding that it simply didn’t help to distinguish right from wrong. But Parfit went to work on it, hacking off a piece here, suturing on a piece there, until he had arrived at a version that seemed to him to combine the best elements of Kantianism and contractualism: “Everyone ought to follow the principles whose universal acceptance everyone could rationally will.” He argued that these principles would be the same ones that were espoused by rule consequentialism. Then, at last, he was in a position to propose his top-of-the-mountain formula, which he called the Triple Theory:

An act is wrong just when such acts are disallowed by some principle that is optimific, uniquely universally willable, and not reasonably rejectable.

The theory's principles were consequentialist because they would lead to the best results (optimific); Kantian because they were universally willable; and contractualist because no person could reasonably reject them.

Parfit wanted his book to be as close to perfect as it could possibly be. He wanted to have answered every conceivable objection. To this end, he sent his manuscript to practically every philosopher he knew, asking for criticisms, and more than two hundred and fifty sent him comments. He labored for years to fix every error. As he corrected his mistakes

and clarified his arguments, the book grew longer. He had originally conceived of it as a short book; it became a long book, and then a very long book supplemented by an even longer book—fourteen hundred pages in all. People began to wonder if he would ever finish.

With his Triple Theory, Parfit believed that he had achieved convergence between three of the main schools of moral thought, but even this didn't satisfy him. There were still major philosophers outstanding whom he admired but whose views disturbed him. He marshalled every possible argument, however quixotic, to prove that what appeared to be irreconcilable differences were merely errors of little significance.

When
Hume claims .
. . that such
preferences are
not contrary to
reason, he is
forgetting, or
mis-stating,
his normative
beliefs. We
should
distinguish
between
Hume's *stated*
view and his
real view.
Though
Nietzsche
makes some
normative
claims that
most of us
would strongly
reject, some of
these claims
are not wholly
sane, and
others depend
on ignorance
or false beliefs
about the
relevant non-
normative
facts. And

Nietzsche
often disagrees
with himself.

There were so many facts
we did not yet know,
Parfit felt, so many
distorting influences of
which we were not yet
aware, and it was always
so easy to make mistakes.
However hopeless the
situation might appear, it
seemed to him that, in the
end, humans converged
toward moral progress.

When Parfit was
young, one of
the most
dazzling figures on the
philosophical scene was
Bernard Williams.
Williams was thirteen
years older than Parfit and
already had a formidable
reputation. He was
urbane, seductive, and
witty—he was famous for
his eviscerating put-
downs and scathing
repartee. He
acknowledged the

originality of Parfit's
work, but, socially, he was
dismissive. Williams was a
club man, a college man,
full of High Table
bonhomie; Parfit would
gobble his dinner and,
while other fellows met
for brandies, dessert, and
cigars, he would hurry
back to his room.

Williams lived a rich,
worldly life. He had flown
Spitfires in the Air Force.
He had lived for years in a
large house in London
with his first wife, the
politician Shirley
Williams, their daughter,
and another couple. He
had an affair with another
man's wife and left his
wife for her; they married
and had two sons. He sat
on royal commissions and
government committees,
issuing opinions on
pornography, drug abuse,
private schools, and
gambling. (He had done,

he liked to say, all the vices.) He wrote about opera.

Williams had started out in classics, and his thinking was formed as much by Greek tragedy as by philosophy—he saw the world in terms of fate, shame, and luck. He thought most moral philosophy was empty and boring. He disdained both Kantianism and consequentialism, and devoted much of his career to destroying them. Both required you to think impersonally, impartially, out of duty, considering others to be as important as yourself; but we cannot and *should* not become impartial, he argued, because doing so would mean abandoning what gives human life meaning. Without selfish partiality—to people you are deeply attached to, your wife and your children, your friends, to

work that you love and
that is particularly yours,
to beauty, to place—we
are nothing. We are
creatures of intimacy and
kinship and loyalty, not
blind servants of the
world.

If he had a highest value,
it was authenticity. To
him, the self was, in the
end, all we have. But, in
most cases, this wasn't
much—most people were
stupid and cruel. Williams
enjoyed his life, but he
was a pessimist of the
bleakest sort. He told a
student that the last
stanza of Matthew
Arnold's poem "Dover
Beach" summed up his
view of things:

Ah, love, let
us be true
To one
another! for
the world,
which seems
To lie
before us like
a land of
dreams,
So various,
so beautiful, so
new,
Hath really
neither joy,
nor love, nor
light,
Nor
certitude, nor
peace, nor
help for pain .
..

Williams thought that meta-ethics—questions about the existence and nature of moral truths—was especially pointless. The idea of moral truth was a delusion, he thought—the fantasy of an “argument that will stop them in their tracks when they come to take

you away.” Philosophy was an art, not a science, an enterprise not of discovery but of conflict. Williams did not propose a moral theory of his own. He was skeptical that any such theory could be plausible, and anyway his brilliance was fundamentally destructive.

Parfit admired Williams more than almost anyone he knew. “Once, Derek showed me a photograph of Bernard Williams when he was provost of King’s College, Cambridge,” Larry Temkin says. “Bernard was standing on the roof of King’s College with a kind of haughty, British, aristocratic look—you know, master of all he surveys, and all of Cambridge was shown below in the distance. And Derek said, ‘Isn’t he wonderful?’ I’ve seen that only once before with him, with a picture of

Rudolph Nureyev.

Nureyev was in the air,
way above the ground,
and he had that look on
his face—in a certain way
it was similar to the one
Bernard had—he knew, as
he was floating, that he
was sort of godlike. And
Derek said, ‘Look at that
—isn’t that just amazing?’
”

Because he admired
Williams so much, it
greatly distressed him that
their views were so far
apart. What he found
most disturbing was
Williams’s view of meta-
ethics. Williams believed
that there were no
objectively true answers to
questions of right and
wrong, or even to
questions of prudence. To
him, morality was a
human system that arose
from human wants and
remained dependent on
them. This didn’t mean
that people felt any less
fiercely about moral

questions—if someone
felt that cruelty was vile,
he could believe it
wholeheartedly even if he
didn't think that that
vileness was an objective
fact, like two plus two
equals four. But, to Parfit,
if it wasn't *true* that
cruelty was wrong, then
the feeling that it was vile
was just a psychological
fact—flimsy, contingent,
apt to be forgotten.

For morality to matter,
there had to be real
reasons to care about it—
objective facts about what
was good and worth
achieving. But if, like
Williams, you believed
that our only reasons for
acting were our desires,
then if a person desired
bad or crazy things—to
cause someone great pain;
to cause himself great
pain—there could be no
decisive argument against
pursuing them.

Williams
says that,
rather than
asking
Socrates’
question
“How ought
we to live?” we
should ask,
“What do I
basically
want?” That, I
believe, would
be a disaster.
There are
better and
worse ways to
live.

After years of agonizing over his inability to convince Williams of his position, Parfit decided that it only *appeared* that Williams rejected the idea of moral truths—that in fact he simply didn’t have the concept. Williams had often said that he didn’t understand what it would mean to have the sort of reasons Parfit talked about. Parfit had always taken this to be a

rhetorical gambit, but now he thought that maybe Williams meant it *literally*. After all, he was a very brilliant philosopher, and if he said he didn't understand something, then one ought to believe him. This thought came as a relief: if all those years he and Williams had not actually been disagreeing but just talking past each other, then there was hope for convergence after all.

But there could never be any real convergence. Williams died in 2003. Even years later, Parfit would tell people over and over again how he had loved him. He would break down in tears when he thought of how he had never been able to get Williams to see what he saw about the truth, and now he never would.

Parfit moved out of
All Souls last year.
Since then, he and

Richards have been living together in a brick terrace house in Oxford that he bought some years ago in preparation for this moment. They are more or less camping—the house is in need of considerable repair, and they are sharing it with two Latvian construction workers, who sleep in what will eventually be the dining room. The house was built for a smaller, daintier species than twenty-first-century humans—Parfit, who is quite tall, strides through its pocket rooms and up its tiny, twisting staircases like Alice in Wonderland. But the house dates from the right era—before 1840—and stands among others of its kind on a quiet, empty lane near the Ashmolean Museum.

D.P.: Oh
gosh, you're
like those
gloomy
Scandinavians.

J.R.R.: I
am?

D.P.: Well,
you said it's
not worth
having new
conscious
beings, given
all the
suffering. The
gloomy
Scandinavians
think life, even
at its best, is
only just
worth living.

J.R.R.: No,
no, it isn't that,
it's just that, if
nothing
existed, I don't
see why it
would count
as better if
things *started*
existing. I can
see the value
of things once
you've got
people
existing.

D.P.: Well,
that's the
person-
affecting view.
You haven't
read Part Four
of "Reasons
and Persons."

Now that Parfit no longer
lives in college, he and
Richards eat dinner
together most nights. By
explicit mutual agreement,
they never discuss his new
book. She has not read it
yet. They do, however, talk
about philosophy.

D.P.:
Suppose we
discovered
some
technique
whereby we
could lengthen
all of our lives
so that we live
happily for a
few hundred
years, but the
cost is we'd all
be sterile—so
we'd be the
last

generation.
Now, your
view might be,
Well, there's
no moral
objection to
that. It's not
going to be
worse for the
people who
don't exist—
they're never
going to exist,
so there's no
one for whom
it's going to be
worse.

J.R.R.: I'm
just not
convinced that
it *is* worse. I
can see that
we have
feelings that it
is, but I can't
see any
objective way
in which
nonexistence
is worse than
existence.

Maybe it is.

D.P.: You
don't mean
that if a child
dies young

who would've
had a very
good life,
nothing bad
has happened
because the
child doesn't
exist, and not
existing isn't a
bad state to be
in!

J.R.R.: I
think once
you've started,
the reasons are
there for the
existing
people.

D.P.: Well,
I agree they're
not exactly the
same, but the
point in
common—

J.R.R.: Yes,
well, they can
have a point in
common
without it
being the
morally
relevant point
in common.
You can't just
say things
resemble each

other in some
respects,
therefore you
draw the same
inferences.

D.P.: So
would your
view be—

J.R.R.: I
haven't really
got much of a
view.

Last August, after nearly
thirty years together, they
married. They went to the
registry office, then
brought a picnic to the
river and went punting.
Although they married
partly for tax reasons,
Parfit found himself
unexpectedly delighted by
the change. Richards's
sister took photographs of
him that day, squinting
into the sun, wearing a
red tie, beaming.

Meanwhile, Richards was
helping him through the
last throes of his book's
production. He had
involved himself in every

detail—the font, the size of the type, the darkness of the type, the color of the paper, the printing of the jacket. He had finished the book he had toiled over with his whole mind for fifteen years, just as he was moving out of the college he had lived in for more than forty years, and in the same week he had married, after nearly seventy years of living more or less alone. The shock of these three transformative events in such a short time was more than he understood. One evening, Richards was helping him pack up his rooms, and everything was chaos around him; he was supposed to fly to America the next day, and he was trying to print out proofs of his book so he could take them with him on the plane. He had a wireless connection from his room to the college office where the printer

was, so he set the thing going, and ran downstairs to check on it, but then something went wrong, so he ran up again, and down again, becoming more and more frantic. And then suddenly he collapsed. He seemed to give up.

I can't
remember
what's
happening.

Richards took him to the doctor. He had transient global amnesia, a syndrome sometimes precipitated by overwhelming mental stress. He didn't remember getting married. He didn't remember having written his book. The doctor asked him if he knew who Richards was.

Yes. She's
the love of my
life.

He recovered his memory after a few hours, but smaller aftershocks have continued. Many times he has broken down in tears—while giving a public lecture, in conversation, in class. Once again he is in a transitional moment, having finished a book, and submerged parts of his life are surfacing. He is more conscious than ever of a shortness: how much more time does he have?

A fourteen-year-old girl wants a baby. If she has one, she will be unable to give him a good start in life. If she has her first baby at twenty-five instead, she will be able to give him a better start in life—but that would be a different baby. So whom is she harming by giving birth at fourteen? No one. Not the baby, as long as his life is worth living.

Suppose we who are living now decide to ignore global warming, with the result that the lives of future people are much harder. It would seem that we have made things worse for those future people. But, in fact, as long as their lives are worth living this is not the case—because if we had acted differently, the world would have been different, and those particular people would never have existed (in the same way that if cars had not been invented most people alive today would never have been born). So, although we have made the world worse in the future, we have made life worse for no one. Parfit calls this conundrum the Non-Identity Problem. He believes that it makes no difference: we still have just as much reason to avoid making life worse for people in the future. But he worries—rightly,

as it turns out—that other people may draw the opposite conclusion: since global warming will not make particular future people worse off, it may seem less bad.

Parfit has always been preoccupied with how to think about our moral responsibilities toward future people. It seems to him the most important problem we have. Besides the issue of global warming, there is the issue of population. It would seem that if the earth were teeming with many billions of people, making everyone's life worse, that would be bad. But what if the total sum of human happiness would be higher with many billions of people whose lives were barely worth living—higher, that is, than with a smaller population of well-off people? Wouldn't the first situation be, in some moral sense, better?


Parfit calls this the Repugnant Conclusion. It seems absurd, but, at least for a consequentialist, its logic is difficult to counter.

The future makes everything more complicated, which is, apart from its enormous importance, why he likes to think about it. The first paper Parfit wrote after he began to study philosophy was on the metaphysics of time. Now this is the subject to which he plans to return. There are so many things about time that he finds puzzling.

When
people
describe time's
passage, they
often say that
we are moving
into the
future, or that
future events
are getting
closer, or that
nowness, or
the quality of
being Now, is
moving down
the series of
events like a
spotlight
moving along
a line of
chorus girls.
But these
claims, though
they can seem
deeply true,
make no sense.

Why, Parfit wonders, are
we so biased toward the
future? Was this tendency
produced by natural
selection? We are upset
when we are told that in
the future we shall have to
endure a day of great pain,

but many people do not
care at all if they are told
that they endured pain in
the past that has been
forgotten; and yet the past
pain is just as real. We
don't have the same bias
with other people: if we
learn that a loved person
suffered greatly before he
died, we are upset by this,
even though it's over. The
past is just as real as the
present. If someone we
loved is dead, that person
isn't real *now*. But that's
just like the fact that
people who are far away
aren't real *here*.



I am now
inclined to
believe that
time's passage
is an illusion.
Since I
strongly want
time's passage
to be an
illusion, I
must be
careful to
avoid being
misled.

Parfit is very struck by
how little time humans
have existed on the earth
compared with how long
they may exist in the
future. He remembers as a
boy hearing Bertrand
Russell on the radio,
talking about memories of
his grandfather, who was
born in 1792. When
Parfit thinks about the
future, he wonders
whether life for future
people will be better or
worse than it is now. He
wants to be optimistic,
but he cannot ignore the
terrible suffering that
people have endured in
the past. Has it all been
worth it? Has the sum of
human happiness
outweighed the sum of
suffering?

I am weakly
inclined to
believe that
the past has
been in itself
worth it. But
this may be
wishful
thinking.

He sees that we have the ability to make the future much better than the past, or much worse, and he knows that he will not live to discover which turns out to be the case. He knows that the way we act toward future generations will be partly determined by our beliefs about what matters in life, and whether we believe that anything matters at all. This is why he continues to try so desperately to prove that there is such a thing as moral truth.

I am now
sixty-seven. To
bring my
voyage to a
happy

conclusion, I
would have to
resolve the
misunderstandings
and
disagreements
that I have
partly
described. I
would need to
find ways of
getting many
people to
understand
what it would
be for things
to matter, and
of getting
these people
to believe that
certain things
really do
matter. I
cannot hope
to do these
things myself.
But . . . I hope
that, with art
and industry,
some other
people will be
able to do
these things,
thereby
completing
this voyage. ♦



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