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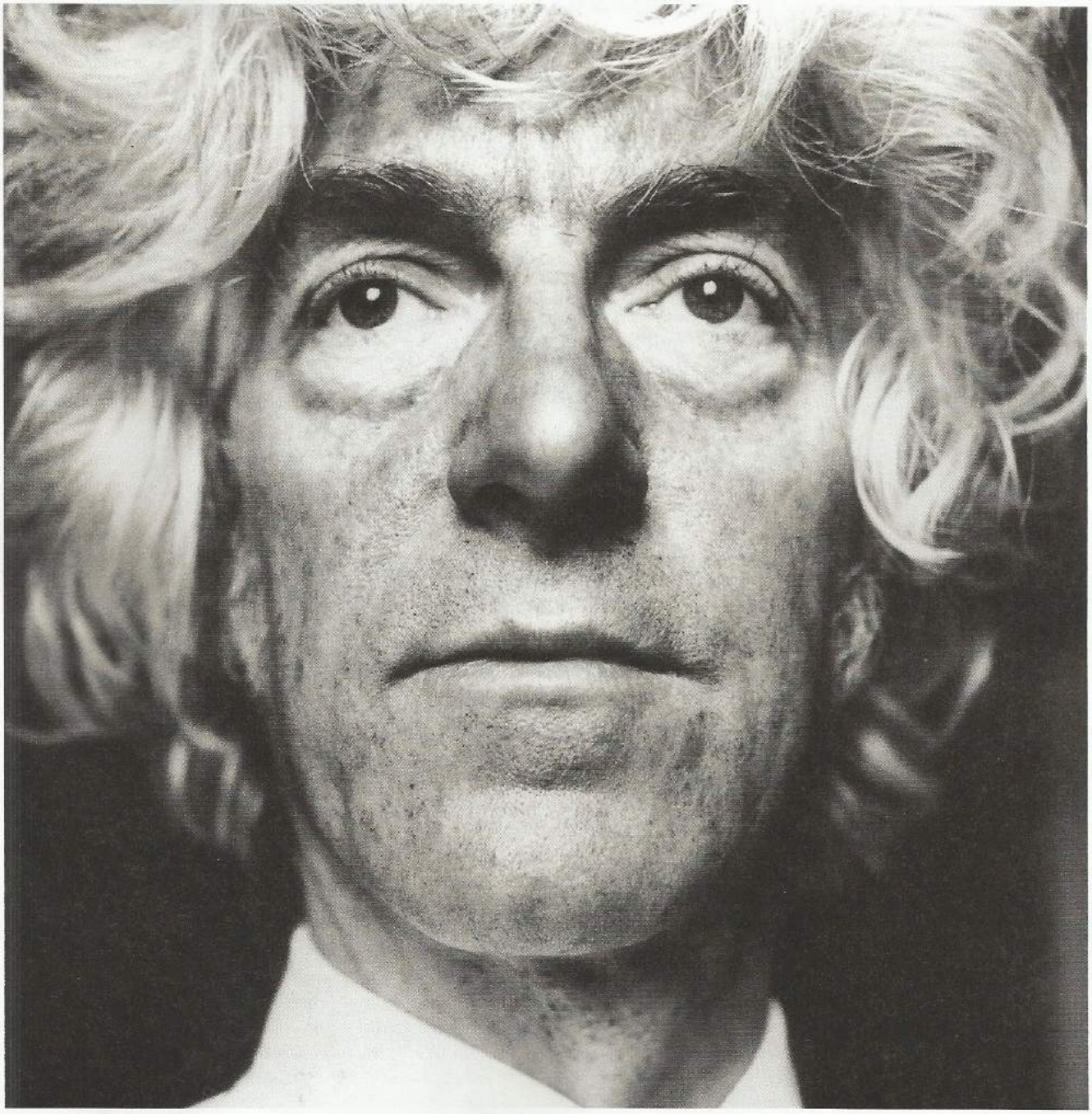

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The mind's eye: Bryan Appleyard on Derek Parfit. 38

BOOKS

John Gray

Lost souls: the uncanny fiction of Robert Aickman. 42

TELEVISION

Rachel Cooke

Acting their age: Dame Judi Dench and friends. 53

BACK PAGES

Nina Caplan: in praise of Australian wine

The NS Q&A: Irvine Welsh

Kate Mossman: serial killers come of age

What truth looks like

Derek Parfit was one of the world's most influential moral philosophers. Though he suffered from aphantasia, the inability to form mental images, he also took photographs, returning repeatedly to the same places in Venice and St Petersburg. What was he searching for?

By Bryan Appleyard

But oh, beamish nephew, beware of the day,
If your Snark be a Boojum! For then
You will softly and suddenly vanish away,
And never be met with again!
Lewis Carroll, "The Hunting of the Snark"

There is a photography exhibition in London in which it is difficult, almost impossible, to see the pictures. There is no obstruction, the lighting is good, all is in plain sight. But there is something in the way, something that interrupts my view.

That something is all-encompassing, inescapable. It is a man, Derek Parfit, who died last year aged 74. He took these pictures, which the Narrative Projects gallery is now selling in editions of five for a very respectable £1,500 each. But Parfit was only a part-time photographer. His primary work was the pursuit of moral truth in a godless world – a Snark that has, in the past, always turned out to be a Boojum.

This work obscures the pictures. Parfit is regarded by many as among the greatest philosophers of his generation. So pervasive was his influence in academia and so fundamental were the questions he asked, that I found myself unable to see the photos as pictures at all. Instead, I kept asking myself questions like: are they about his philosophy? What do they mean? What should I be thinking now?

Parfit was born in 1942 in China, the son of two missionary doctors who lost their Christian faith while working with the Chinese. A year after his birth they moved to Oxford. Parfit went to Eton where he excelled in everything except maths. Aged 18 he travelled to New York, listened to jazz and tried to be a poet. He then went to Oxford where, after a false start with history, he read philosophy.

His brilliance brought him a fellowship at Oxford's elite All Souls College, which was, in effect, to be his home for the rest of his life. He moved out of the college for a time to live with another philosopher, Janet Radcliffe Richards, who eventually became his wife. Later he moved back into All Souls though the relationship continued. Despite visiting professorships at various American universities, overwhelmingly his life was that of a cloistered Oxford don.

But he was also a very keen photographer. The photographs currently on show are in colour and printed from film slides or from slides that have been scanned into a computer. They only depict three places – Oxford, but primarily Venice and St Petersburg. He visited the latter two cities annually just to take photographs.

They were taken at dawn or dusk – like most photographers he liked slanting light – and many include water and/or mist (again, beloved of photographers). In spite of all that, his pictures look nothing like the usual romantic or postcard shots of these cities. Something else is going on, something that may well involve his philosophy.

People do not appear in many of these pictures and any that do seem incidental, an afterthought to the buildings. Furthermore, the pictures are deeply inexpressive. Of course, these buildings, these bridges, these waterways are beautiful, but there is nothing personal about this beauty. Parfit was clearly going for something still, timeless, something beyond ourselves.

This becomes clearer when you realise how much these images were processed. Janet Radcliffe Richards tells me he had a professional "toucher-upper" who was required to remove objects from his pictures – most ambitiously an army truck from the front of the St Petersburg Winter Palace and some scaffolding from the facade of San Marco in Venice. Routinely telephone wires, litter and people were removed.

"He was capturing an ideal," says Richards. "He thought these buildings were beautiful and he wanted to capture them at their best. He was very concerned with having permanence for things that he ▶

DEREK PARFIT. COURTESY OF NARRATIVE PROJECTS, LONDON

Parfit vision: top, *Untitled (Palazzo Grassi at Night)*, circa 1980s; above, *Untitled (Boat Straps)*, circa 1980s

▶ thought were beautiful."

His perfectionism in photography was as fierce as in his philosophy. Over about 25 years he shot thousands of rolls of film but he only believed he had made "about 120 good photographs". There was method in this, an adaptation of his own sense of a shortcoming. "What he said about the whole project," says Richards, "was that he wasn't an artist but he was a good critic, so he took thousands and thousands of photographs and just selected the ones he thought were best."

Sometimes his processing went wrong. Richards tells me that one St Petersburg picture was not displayed by the gallery because it was just too processed – "too CGI, too postcard". And his favoured cities did not always co-operate. He eventually stopped going to St Petersburg because he said the snow had become the wrong col-our and he abandoned photography altogether when he decided weather in general had changed.

His method was expensive. He had Nikon cameras with many lenses including a pricey "tilt and shift" lens to correct the leaning buildings caused by the camera's monocular view. The processing and travel weren't cheap either. But, as Richards points out, he lived for much of his life in All Souls, where all his basic needs were taken care of. Photography was the only significant drain on his income.

There is one clinical explanation for his enthusiasm. Parfit suffered from aphantasia, which meant he could not visualise imagery or retain pictures in his mind. This must make the visual world an even more fleeting phenomenon than it is for those not so afflicted.

This fleetingness must have been especially poignant for a man intent upon discovering the timeless. Photographs fix time, condensing the chaos of a moment into something more permanent. In taking a photograph he was doing one of the few things his brain could not do unaided.

Strangely, Richards resists the suggestion that the pictures have anything to do with the philosophy. Perhaps it was a distinction Parfit made to separate his holidays – as he called his photographic trips – from his hard philosophical labours. He worked at these for nine hours a day and then, being a lifelong insomniac, he drugged himself to sleep, waking between 10 am and noon. On holiday he rose earlier to catch the slanting light of dawn.

> Some Tibetan monks included passages from Parfit in their chanting

In fact, the connection between the photographs and the work is flagrant. I asked a prominent philosopher who had never seen the pictures what he thought a Parfit photograph would look like solely on the basis of his philosophy. He described with uncanny accuracy precisely these pictures.

Two of Parfit's former students have curated this exhibition and one of them, Sam Sokolsky-Tifft, makes it clear that the intention of the show is to encourage viewers to see the links between the pictures and philosophy. I put to him Richards' doubts about the connection. "Derek may have said the same thing himself," he says, "but I don't know that that means they are right."

He tells me he had been struck by a moment when, in a lecture, Parfit quoted a line of Homer and wept. This suggested to him that there was an artist inside the man struggling to get out. Parfit would also weep at the mere thought of suffering. "He believed," wrote the *New Yorker's* Larissa MacFarquhar, "that no one, not even a monster like Hitler, could deserve to suffer at all."

The problem of suffering is, of course, at the centre of Christian theology – if God is perfectly good why does anybody ever suffer? A narrative of the misuse of God-given free will fixed this for believers until the grip of faith on the Western mind began to loosen in the 19th century. What then? God had been the definer and guarantor of a moral system. The hunting of the Snark of godless moral truth began in earnest.

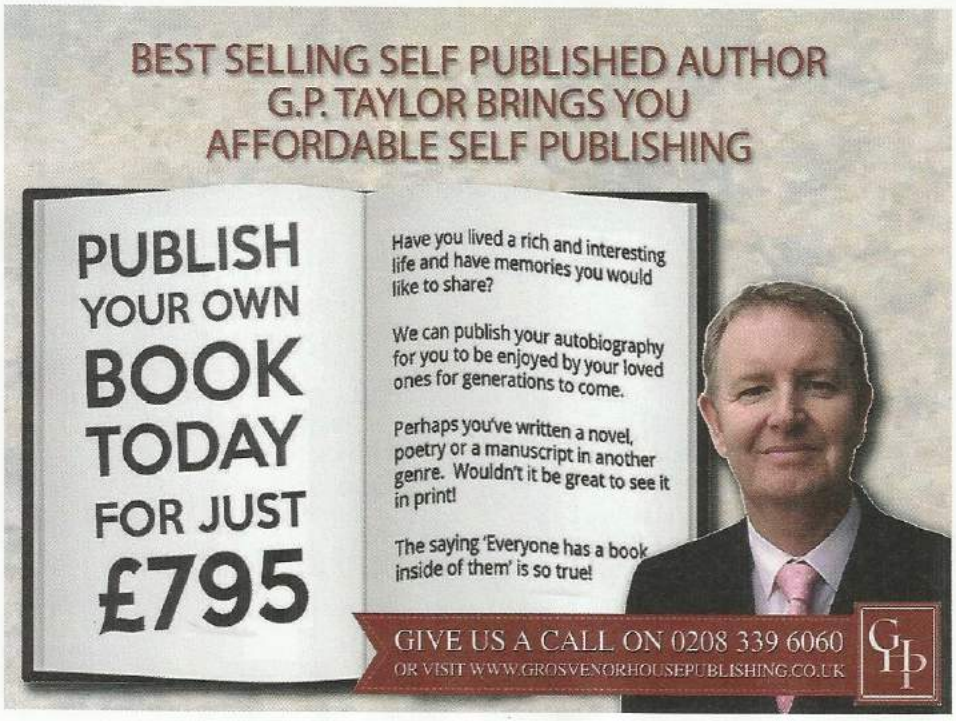
Humanism and, in particular, utilitarianism in various forms came to the rescue. They still flourish to this day as the default defence whenever moral fundamentals are debated. But, as many philosophers have pointed out, they have serious limitations. The arguments are complex but, in the end, they come down to the insight of the great philosopher Henry Sidgwick that there is "an ultimate and fundamental contradiction in our apparent intuitions of what is reasonable in conduct".

Parfit was inspired by Sidgwick and he shared his horror at the possibility that there was no rational basis for moral behaviour, no external principles that could be applied to all human conduct. If such principles did not exist, he wrote, "nothing would matter, and we would have no reasons to try to decide how to live".

He wrote only two books on moral philosophy. The first, *Reasons and Persons* (1984), demolished much conventional moral thought and went on to signal his solution – a downgrading of the importance of human identity. The use of the self as somehow fundamental, he decided, was a grave error. The thought came to him as a revelation.

> 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.

The obsession with suffering, the willed reduction of the self – these things may sound familiar. As Parfit was delighted to discover, his inspiration was very close to that of the Buddha. Indeed, some Buddhist



were delighted to discover that too. Having been introduced to Parfit by the friend of a Harvard philosopher, a group of Tibetan monks began to include passages from *Reasons and Persons* in their chanting.

On What Matters (2011; volume three, 2017), his second and last book, was his attempt to show that there was moral truth, meaning that moral questions could have true or false answers. He does not now reject previous arguments, rather he reformulates them into what he called his Triple Theory.

> An act is wrong if and only if, or just when, such acts are disallowed by some principle that is
> 1) one of the principles whose being universal laws would make things go best,
> 2) one of the only principles whose being universal laws everyone could rationally will...
> 3) a principle that no one could reasonably reject.

The tripleness of the theory arose from Parfit's blending of Kant's rules-based theory of consequentialism – which judged actions on their effects – and various contractarian systems in which morality is based on agreements between individuals and/or governments. None of these was wrong, argued Parfit, they were just different ways up the same mountain.

Philosophers are divided on whether this amounts to a proof that moral truth exists – though I doubt that any will deny that Parfit's two books are the most discussed works of moral philosophy written in our time. But what is the link to the photographs?

Here's a clue: "One of my strongest desires," he once said, "is that Venice never be destroyed." His photographs of even the most familiar sights look strange because they adhere to no conventions of photographic realism. Rather, they present these buildings as ideal forms, timeless and impersonal. His entire philosophy was based upon the pursuit of an ideal, timeless formulation of moral truth. This, he is saying, is what truth looks like.

He would probably, had he lived, have expanded *On What Matters* even further, outlining the moral injunctions that arose from his Triple Theory. Some had already become clear: we should go beyond ourselves to care not just for other people, but also for the deep future, for the generations to come. The rich should give away their money to the poor because the money does not really belong to them in the first place. And so on. Above all, we should not endow our own selves with any special privileges.

Is the Triple Theory another Boojum of moral philosophy? Roger Scruton thinks so. "Nothing," he wrote of *On What Matters*, "that *really* matters to human beings – their loves, responsibilities, attachments, their delights, aesthetic values, and spiritual needs – occurs in Parfit's interminable narrative."

In a sense he is right. This kind of abstract, analytical philosophy is not the right tool for examining morality. Morality is born in the streets. It arises naturally in human societies. As such it may be studied – anthropology, evolutionary psychology and game theory provide some insights – but to pursue moral truth seems absurdly reductionist. It is like seeking a rational basis for friendship, love, grief or any of the human passions. Some things are just there, the conditions of our existence.

Yet there is something thrilling about Parfit's thoughts and photographs. The whole becomes a work of art, a vision rather than a proof of meaning in a godless world. Parfit discovered something that wasn't entirely a Boojum but it certainly wasn't a Snark. ●

"The Mind's Eye: The Photographs of Derek Parfit" is at Narrative Projects gallery, London W1, until 30 June
Bryan Appleyard writes for the Sunday Times

THE NS POEM

Inland Thornbills

John Kinsella

The lucerne trees are reverberating with crackling seedpods
and aggregating grasshoppers, each tendril brash and volatile.

Below the twists, the screws of charcoal seedpods working contents
out to drop into the dust below, ants collecting black teardrops.

And into the cool heat, the meltdown of senses, a flock – a *family?* –
of fledgling inland thornbills, rippling positive-negative of chests,

as big as my eye when I watch through fissures and gaps in foliage,
as they vacate rapidly to leave one behind thinking – *surely* –

one inland thornbill on its own in uneasy balance with me,
waiting for the vibration trip-switch to change the setting,

studying me with an eye bigger than the ambitions
of the greediest humans, bigger even than the final

voids gifted by miners,
profiteers.

John Kinsella's selected poems, *Drowning in Wheat*, is published by Picador. His latest collection, *The Wound*, is published by Arc.