A questionable perk of life as a professional philosopher is being the occasional recipient of unsolicited monographs by self-published amateurs. Affectionately known as “crazy books”, those volumes crash the mailroom of a Philosophy Department, bearing titles like Ethics of the Astral Plane or The Key To All Ontologies. They promise answers to the deepest, oldest questions: the meaning of life, the universe and everything, unearthed without the help of experts or academic training.

One such coincidence made me recall a colleague I stopped short of. I always felt bad, he said, that we did not have time to read these books. What if somewhere within were the insights of an untutored genius, lost forever through the impatience cynicism of people like us?

I hope Derek Parfit’s friends will not be offended when I say that my colleague’s admonition made me think of him. The author of two wildly ambitious books in moral philosophy, Reasons and Persons (1984) and On What Matters (2011), Parfit had no formal education in the subject. He read history at Oxford, then switched to philosophy while visiting Columbia and Harvard, before returning to Oxford as a Prize Fellow at All Souls College, where he read, thought, and wrote about philosophy — amid various visiting appointments in the US — until his unexpected death in January 2017.

The announcement of Parfit’s death inspired deep and widespread grief among philosophers. In part, this is because so many owe personal debts to his extraordinary intellectual generosity. Parfit was legendary for the speed, acuity and sheer volume of his commentary on others’ work. But the grief reflects, too, Parfit’s stature as perhaps the pre-eminent moral philosopher of the past fifty years. Parfit’s work has had a profound impact on anglophone philosophy and it is safe to predict that its influence will persist.

Parfit was prodigiously inventive, overflowing with ideas. But some are especially central. The first, and still the most significant, is that our identity over time and distinctness from one another are less substantial, both metaphorically and ethically, than many of us suppose. This idea is what lies behind a passage from Parfit’s philosophy, Reasons and Persons, quoted in almost every obituary: “When I believed [in a deep fact of personal identity], 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”.

Parfit’s view about the unimportance of personal identity is hard to formulate briefly and the arguments in support of it are intricate, resting on thought-experiments about malfunctioning Star Trek-style teleporters, actual experiments involving brain bioterrorism and mash-ups that speculate about the transplant of cerebral hemispheres. The basic idea is that, in the absence of an immaterial soul, what unifies me over time — what makes me, now, the same person who started writing this review last week — is the interplay of relations maintained during the intervening days. The most important of these relations are psychological, matters of continuity and connection in memory, belief and will, which I can bear to other people, too, though I typically do so to vastly lesser degree. It is possible, Parfit argues, the “separateness of persons” is diminished, and the rational response is a corresponding diminution in self-interest, a greater willingness to sacrifice myself for the greater good. There is a path from the insubstantial nature of personal identity to a more altruistic ethics.

There are notable gaps in Parfit’s reasoning. His argument neglects the view that we are fundamentally human: our identity and personal identity, therefore, are functions of biology, not memory. That is a glaring omission. Parfit is not well-articulated when addressing the idea that we are animals of a certain species is like attempting to escape from a locked room without ever trying the key. But what is now called “animalism” was not well-articulated when Parfit was writing and its subsequent development owes much to him. Nor does he ignore it in later work. Parfit objects to animality in a recent essay, alarmingly titled “We Are Not Human Beings”. In Reasons and Persons, his clipped prose, with its repetitive sentences, poetic cadence and sly humour becomes the vehicle for a depth and range of insight rarely matched in recent philosophy. The upshot is an Anglicized version of the Buddhist “no-self” view, a philosophy that could change your life.

Fast forward almost thirty years, and as passages from Reasons and Persons were being chanted by Tibetan monks, Parfit published the first two volumes of his long-awaited sequel, On What Matters. It too is metaphysically, but what interests Parfit now is not the metaphysics of persons but of reasons for acting. According to Parfit, there are objective truths about how we should live, what there is reason to do, and what is right and wrong, that are irreducible, causally inert, and wholly independent of us. Not only are these truths independent of what we think and of our nature as human beings, the reasons that govern us are independent of what we want. None of this prevents us from knowing what they are. Through this austere lens, Parfit frames a theory of right action as obedience to principled reasons that make sense for everyone to legislate for all.

Volume One of On What Matters is devoted to the interpretation of this gnomic principle, which adapts and renovates a formula from ethics about anything else in the world. Peter Singer’s authoritative collection, Does Anything Really Matter?, includes a range of responses to Parfit, in turns amusing, critical and conciliatory. Volume Three of On What Matters gives Parfit’s replies, along with some striking new material on the morality of causing and preventing harm.

On What Matters features Parfit’s “meta-ethics” — his theory of the meaning, metaphysics and epistemology of ethical claims — is that, unlike his dramatic conclusions about the ethics of identity, it is not exactly new. The idea that ethical truths are objective and irreducible to other claims is commonly found among the British philosophers of the early twentieth century: G. E. Moore, W. D. Ross, and Parfit’s favourite, Henry Sidgwick. In his Principia Ethica, a bible of the Bloomsbury Group, Moore argued that the ethical sense of “good” is utterly unanalyzable. Like many philosophers, Parfit is sceptical of this. If we can say in other terms what it is to be a reason, it is by doing metaphysics, not linguistic analysis. That is how we learn that heat is molecular kinetic energy, for example — not by analysing words but by investigating its nature. For Parfit, what blocks this approach to reasons is the principle that, when it is informative to learn that what is A is also B, (even though being A is the same as being B), the meaning of either “A” or “B” can be further analysed. For instance, in the case of heat, it is informative to learn that what is hot has high molecular kinetic energy because, even though these terms pick out a single property, they do so in different ways. The meaning of “hot” can be analysed, Parfit thinks, in terms of the causes and effects of heat. This sets the stage for his central argument. Since the meaning of “reason” cannot be further analysed and it is informative to learn, in other terms, when something is a reason, it follows by Parfit’s principle that the property of being a reason cannot be identified with any property expressed in those terms. Unlike heat, which reduces to molecular kinetic energy, being a reason does not reduce to anything else. As you might guess, the details of this argument need careful scrutiny. This is difficult terrain, even for experts. The force of Parfit’s reasoning turns on whether his principle about information, identity and meaning is true. But the truth of this principle is far from obvious and Parfit does not argue for it. It is hard not to be dismayed by this omission. One of the deepest, most original and so-called “new philosophy” was a great advance in clarity about the dimensions of meaning, through the work of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, followed by, among others, Saul Kripke and Gareth Evans. Not so in Parfit’s case. Parfit’s approach to the philosophy of language has an audacious logic, as he reinvents its basic tools from scratch. It is difficult to make progress without standing on the shoulders of giants, and it is inefficient, too, to attempt to go back to Aristotle; for others, it means turning to Hume or Kant. Perhaps these are all wrong turns, as Parfit must believe. But their proponents are neglected, not refuted, by his work.

In principle, Parfit’s disengagement from the history of analytic and earlier philosophy could be generative. It could make room for bold new ideas. But it is also a liability. While there are moments of genius in On What Matters, there are moments that frustrate as well. Professional philosophers will make time to read it; they will study it and learn from it. Those less patient and more cynical may turn instead to Reasons and Persons, to the passages chanted by Tibetan monks, and to a picture of themselves at once perplexing and persuasive, beautiful and bizarre.