

Beyond Objectivism and Subjectivism

Derek Parfit's two volume work *On What Matters* is, as many philosophers attest, a significant contribution to ethical theory and metaethics. Peter Singer has described the book as "a major philosophical event" (Singer 2011). It is an exceptionally long book. However, as Gerald Lang has written in *Utilitas*, "[d]espite its length, *On What Matters* demands serious study by everyone with a serious interest in philosophical ethics" (Lang 2012, 300). In *Mind*, Kieran Setiya calls Parfit's book "a monument that will shape the field for many years" (Setiya 2011, 1281).

Parfit's work is perhaps best thought of as a collection of three separate books. The first book argues in favor of what Parfit calls an "objectivist" theory of reasons. This is the main concern of the present paper. The second book is a defense of the surprising and controversial claim that Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, and contractualism all ultimately aim at the same ethical position. The third book is a metaethical treatise defending moral realism. It is of great significance to the study of reasons that a philosopher of Parfit's stature has written what amounts to a book-length treatment of the issue of reasons.

Subjectivism about reasons, as Parfit defines it, is the view that a person has a reason to perform act A if she has some motivation to do A, or would have motivation to do A in certain circumstances. In *On What Matters*, Derek Parfit presents a series of arguments against subjectivism about reasons. In Parfit's view, if subjectivism were true, nothing would actually matter. Parfit contends that

there are only two positions regarding reasons: objectivism and subjectivism. I will argue for an inclusive position on reasons that is neither subjectivist nor objectivist. On this view of reasons, there are some reasons that are grounded in the motivations of individuals, and there are also reasons that are not grounded in such motivations. On the view I put forward, I contend, against Parfit, that even if there were no objective reasons, it would still be the case that some things matter.

In *On What Matters*, Derek Parfit divides theories of reasons into two camps: objectivism and subjectivism. On an objectivist theory of reasons, what one has reason to do has its ground in the value of one's goal. If a goal is a good one, the goodness of the goal is the source of the reason to pursue it. The subjectivist, on the other hand, derives all claims about reasons from the actual or hypothetical desires of the agent. An agent has reason to act in a certain way when acting in that way would fulfill her desires. Call this the actual desires version of subjectivism. On the hypothetical desires version of subjectivism, an agent has reason to act in way that would satisfy her suitably refined desires. For example, some proponents of hypothetical desires subjectivism hold that one has reason to act in ways that would satisfy the desires one would have if fully informed. A further possible condition on hypothetical desires subjectivism is that individuals are procedurally rational: such individuals have followed adequate rules of reasoning in their deliberations.

The distinction between procedural rationality and substantive rationality is key to Parfit's arguments. If subjectivists were allowed to make appeal to substantial principles of reason, the distinction between objectivism and subjectivism would collapse. Smith (2009) argues that this distinction does collapse. Parfit, in drawing the objectivism/subjectivism distinction, fails in Smith's view to adequately distinguish principles of procedural and substantive rationality. For this reason, Smith holds that the lines drawn by Parfit do not adequately distinguish the positions on offer. This is a serious concern, but it does not affect the arguments on offer here. It does, however, provide another reason for thinking, as I will argue, that the objectivist/subjectivist distinction is not exhaustive.

Parfit argues against both actual desires subjectivism and hypothetical desires subjectivism. Subjectivism is, as Parfit notes, a position that many philosophers accept. Parfit claims two of the most significant figures in contemporary ethics are subjectivists: Christine Korsgaard and Bernard Williams. Philosophers sometimes call the subjectivist position "internalism" about reasons and the objectivist position "externalism." The internalism of Williams (1981) is clearly a target of Parfit. The externalist view that Williams rejects holds that, in Maria Alvarez's words, "the reasons an agent has for acting are not dependent on his desires" (Alvarez 2010, 128). This essentially amounts to what Parfit calls "objectivism." The internalist, by contrast, claims that reasons for acting are dependent on one's desires. It is worth noting that the terms "internalism" and

“externalism” are used in a variety of senses in the philosophical literature. Shafer-Landau (2003) contains an excellent account of the different versions of “internalism” and “externalism” used in the philosophical literature. The subjectivist view of Williams is what Shafer-Landau calls “reasons internalism.” To avoid confusion with other notions labeled “internalism” and “externalism,” I will continue to use Parfit’s clearly defined terms “objectivism” and “subjectivism” instead.

Parfit’s main argument against subjectivism is the Agony Argument. The Agony Argument is a *reductio ad absurdum* of subjectivism. Parfit holds the view that all persons have a reason to avoid their own future agony. I will not disagree with this claim here. It seems quite plausible. Yet subjectivists, according to Parfit, must deny this plausible claim. Therefore, subjectivism is false.

Parfit argues that subjectivists must deny that persons have reason to avoid their own future agony based on some rather far fetched hypothetical examples. Consider a person, Agatha, who is fully informed and procedurally rational. Agatha has no desire whatsoever to not be in agony in the future. On a subjectivist theory, this would imply that Agatha has no reason to avoid her own future agony. Yet, as Parfit holds, Agatha does have a reason to avoid her own future agony. So, subjectivism is false.

Not only does Parfit hold that subjectivism is false, according to Parfit if subjectivism were true, nothing at all would matter. According to Parfit’s *All or None Argument*, the only ground for having a reason on a subjectivist account of

reasons would be that one has some desire. Parfit then presents a dilemma: either all of our desires provide us with reasons or none of them do. If all of our desires present us with reasons, then a person who desires to be in future agony would have reason to be in agony in the future. Parfit holds that we could not have such reasons, on the grounds noted above. Therefore the horn of the dilemma on which all of our desires give us reasons is ruled out, and the result of the argument is that none of our desires give us reasons.

This argument is based on a false dilemma. There is room here for a third option: the option is that some of our desires ground reasons, and some of our desires do not. A person who has a desire to spend the rest of her life in horrible agony does not have a reason to be in such agony. This seems plausible. Yet it also seems plausible that some, but not all, of our desires are the basis for reasons for action. A person might have a deeply held desire to run a marathon, and this desire might give her a reason to run a marathon.

One kind of desire that provides a basis for reasons for action is what I will call an intrinsic goal desire. I will provide two examples of individuals with an intrinsic goal desire. Mary wants to run a marathon. Mary wants to achieve this goal, and she wants to achieve this goal for its own sake. Mary does not have a merely instrumental desire to run a marathon: she does not want to run a marathon for health reasons, or even for the sake of her own pleasure or happiness. She recognizes the fact that running a marathon might not make her feel pleasure or happiness. Still, this is a goal she has, and she cares very

deeply about accomplishing this goal. She has, in the terminology I am using, an intrinsic goal desire to run a marathon.

Clyde, on the other hand, has an intrinsic goal desire to climb a mountain. For Clyde, climbing a mountain is a goal that he cares about deeply, not for health-related or hedonic reasons. There is no other desire Clyde has that would be satisfied if he climbs a mountain. He simply wants to climb a mountain for the sake of climbing a mountain.

Intrinsic goal desires matter. I contend that intrinsic goal desires sometimes give agents reasons to act in certain ways. I will call these reasons intrinsic goal reasons. Mary has a reason to run a marathon and Clyde has a reason to climb a mountain. These reasons are agent-relative reasons. Let's say that Mary has no desire to climb a mountain and Clyde no desire to run a marathon. Then while Mary has reason to run a marathon, she has no reason to climb a mountain.

An objectivist theory such as Parfit's lacks the resources to capture intrinsic goal reasons. There are only four possible relevant situations on an objectivist theory of reasons: (1) Climbing a mountain and running a marathon are both good; (2) Neither climbing a mountain nor running a marathon is good; (3) Climbing a mountain is good but running a marathon is not good; and (4) Running a marathon is good but climbing a mountain is not good.

None of these four scenarios would present a correct account of what Mary and Clyde have reason to do. If scenario (1) obtains, and both climbing a

mountain and running a marathon are good, then both Mary and Clyde have reason to both run a marathon and climb a mountain. This is implausible. If this were the case, Mary, who has no desire whatsoever to climb a mountain, would be acting against what she has reason to do in failing to climb a mountain, for she would have a reason to climb a mountain.

If scenario (2) obtains, and neither marathon running nor mountain climbing have any value, then an objectivist position would imply that Mary does not have reason to run a marathon and Clyde does not have reason to climb a mountain. Yet these are goals that Mary and Clyde care deeply about. These are also goals that do not run contrary to reason: Neither Mary nor Clyde desires anything like their own future agony, or the destruction of the entire world. For this reason the implication of objectivism in this scenario that Mary and Clyde lack reason to act in the ways that they want to act seems implausible.

Scenarios (3) and (4) fail for similar reasons. First, in scenario (3), in which mountain climbing would be good but marathon running would not be, Mary would not have reason to run a marathon. This seems false. An analogous problem arises for scenario (4): Clyde would, implausibly, have no reason to climb a mountain.

Pure objectivism cannot account for intrinsic goal reasons. There are such reasons. Therefore pure objectivism is false. A further implication of the existence of intrinsic goal reasons is that Parfit's conclusion regarding the bleak implications of subjectivism is incorrect. Even in a nihilist scenario, in which no

goals were good, there would still be reason to act in certain ways, because we deeply care about acting in those ways. Even in a world with no objective goods whatsoever, something would still matter. It would still matter to Mary whether or not she will run a marathon. It would still matter to Clyde whether or not he will climb a mountain.

The falsehood of pure objectivism does not imply blanket subjectivism. While we might have reasons to act in certain ways because of our deeply held desires, we might also have reasons to act in certain ways because of the goodness of our goals. Objectivism and subjectivism, as defined by Parfit, do not exhaust all of the possibilities in logical space. There is room for what I will call an inclusive theory of reasons.

On an inclusive theory of reasons, we have both the kind of reasons that objectivists believe in and the kinds of reasons subjectivists believe in. Some of our reasons are reasons proper because certain goals are good and worth achieving. Helping other people in need is good, and so people have a reason to help other people in need. We have a reason to help other people in need even if we have no desire whatsoever to help other people in need. We would have reason to help other people in need even if we would have no such desire if we were fully informed and procedurally rational. Further, as Parfit contends in the *Agony Argument*, we would have a reason to want to avoid our future agony even if we lacked an actual or hypothetical fully informed, procedurally rational

desire to avoid such agony. If these arguments are correct, across-the-board subjectivist position is false.

Chang (2004) makes a case for what I here call an inclusive theory of reasons. Chang's argument differs from the one I will present here. Chang argues that there are cases in which the reasons for two alternatives are of equal weight, and in such cases (like the case of Buridan's ass) one has a reason to act in a certain way simply because one feels like acting in one way or another. So if Buridan's ass simply feels like having one hay bundle rather than another, the ass has reason to act in this way rather than another. Chang's arguments strengthen the case for an inclusive theory of reasons.

Some of our reasons are reasons proper because acting in such a way would satisfy a deeply held desire. We have, as I have argued above, intrinsic goal desires. This is not to say that every desire provides us with a reason: if we have a desire to be in deep agony in the future, then, as Parfit correctly contends, this does not imply that we have a reason to be in agony in the future.

If an inclusive theory of reasons is correct, then the proper approach to reasons is one that goes beyond the possibilities considered by Parfit. There is a path beyond objectivism and subjectivism. The positions on offer in the philosophical literature, whether termed "objectivism" or "subjectivism," "internalism" or "externalism," are not exhaustive. Recognizing the roles of various kinds of reasons in our lives makes it clear to us that we have both to obey the

demands of morality, but also to follow our own desires in what we do in our lives.

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