

DAVID SOBEL

PAIN FOR OBJECTIVISTS: THE CASE OF MATTERS
OF MERE TASTE

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ABSTRACT. Can we adequately account for our reasons of mere taste without holding that our desires ground such reasons? Recently, Scanlon and Parfit have argued that we can, pointing to pleasure and pain as the grounds of such reasons. In this paper I take issue with each of their accounts. I conclude that we do not yet have a plausible rival to a desire-based understanding of the grounds of such reasons.

KEY WORDS: practical reason, subjectivism, Scanlon, Parfit, tastes

Subjectivism about reasons for action is the thesis that only an agent's contingent concerns ultimately ground her practical reasons. In cases in which subjectivism is offered in a cognitivist spirit, to ground a reason would be to be a part of the truth-maker of one having that reason.¹ Subjectivists disagree amongst themselves about exactly which of an agent's contingent concerns, that is, concerns that one could be a coherent agent with or without, are the authoritative ones such that they ground reasons. Yet subjectivists agree that if one has a reason to O, that reason can only be grounded by the fact that O-ing would serve some contingent concern or other.

Objectivism comes in different strengths. "Weak objectivism" holds that there is a significant class of reasons that is grounded, at least in part, by an agent's contingent concerns, but that there is another significant class of reasons that is grounded, at least in part, without reference to an agent's contingent concerns. Thus, one attracted to such a view might hold that when it comes to matters of "mere taste" one's contingent concerns ground one's reasons but in more important matters, such as whether or not one

¹ I assume that the subjectivist and objectivist positions are each compatible with a cognitivist or non-cognitivist account of the status of claims about reasons. However, I think nothing I say here will hinge on this assumption. I do sometimes speak of truth-makers concerning reason claims and this might seem to demand a realist interpretation that I do not think I am committed to. The main idea when I use that phrase is to establish a contrast with merely tracking claims about reasons. I assume that this distinction can be re-established using other terminology such as constitutive vs. non-constitutive that are neutral with respect to the cognitivist status of reasons.

should enter into a radically non-egalitarian romantic relationship, one's reasons are not grounded by one's contingent concerns.

"Strong objectivism" holds that no reasons (or almost no reasons) are grounded, even in part, by an agent's contingent concerns. An immediate worry one might have about strong objectivism is how such a view can account for the irresistible thought that some people have more reason to taste this chocolate ice cream rather than that strawberry ice cream and other people have more reason to taste the strawberry where such reasons stem from the taste of the desert (rather than, say, health concerns) and one's reaction to it.

Accounts that allow that, at least in some cases, desires can ground reasons have a seemingly attractive way of understanding the source of our reasons in matters of mere taste. They can say that, other things equal, I have more reason to taste this rather than that because I prefer the former. And you might have more reason to taste that rather than this, other things equal, because you prefer it. But a number of influential philosophers have recently championed arguments that allege to show that contingent Humean desires could never play such a grounding role. Two prominent examples of this are McDowell's objection to "psychologism" and Quinn's "behavioristic" understanding of desire (McDowell, 1995; Quinn, 1993). Obviously, the hardest test case for such claims will be how they account for our reasons of mere taste.

Derek Parfit has recently defended the view that "no reasons are provided by desires." (Parfit, 2001).² Thomas Scanlon has recently told us that "My main claim (in chapter 1 of *What We Owe to Each Other*) is that desires do not generally provide reasons in the way that desire-fulfillment theories suppose. That is to say, it is rarely, if ever, the case that a person has reason to do A because that will promote the fulfillment of some desire that he or she has." (Scanlon, 2002).³ Scanlon goes on to say that he stands by this central claim from the book. Thus both Parfit and Scanlon are defending a version of strong objectivism.

In this paper I will be arguing against Parfit and Scanlon. Each attempts to use the notions of pleasure and pain to account for our reasons of mere taste within a strong objectivist framework. I will try to show that this attempt fails. I go on to claim that the way in which the maneuver of

² Apparently this paper will form the basis for chapter 1 of Parfit's long awaited book *Rediscovering Reasons*.

³ In his 1998 Scanlon writes, "I will defend the stronger claim that desires almost never provide reasons for action in the way described by the standard desire model." p. 43. This qualification at the end of the sentence is needed because Scanlon, as we will see, develops his own account of what desires are and it is for him a separate question whether or not his notion of desires can provide reasons.

Parfit and Scanlon fails casts light on a serious general problem for strong objectivism, namely that such views are unable to account persuasively for our reasons of mere taste. But, whatever the merits of my criticisms here, strong objectivists surely owe us more of a story about our reasons of mere taste than we have so far been given.

I will be assuming that there is a significant range of cases, at least involving our reasons to experience certain flavors, smells, tactile sensations, color and pattern experiences, and simple auditory sensations, where we want to say that one's reasons are determined by one in some sense "finding favor" with the option. I am also assuming that different agents can have reasons to go for different options in matters of mere taste. That is, such reasons are not fully grounded by the option in independence of our response to that option.

The philosophers I explicitly take issue with in this paper are eager to defend the assumption that, broadly construed, favorable responses affect our reasons. Indeed, I have found very few willing to challenge this assumption. As will become clear, I do not want to build into this notion of finding favor a subjectivist interpretation. Rather I will be arguing that we cannot make adequate sense of this notion without giving a grounding role to desires.

One might concede that which flavor I have most reason to eat differs from the one that you have most reason to eat, yet deny that there are any matters of taste in my sense by denying that what grounds the reasons has anything to do with our favorable reactions. That is, one might concede that the flavor I have most reason to taste is determined by features of me that differ from other rational agents (e.g. my shoe size) but claim that these features are not in any sense what I have a favorable or positive reaction to. Such a position is possible, but implausible when applied to my reasons of mere taste.

Of course, famously Aristotelians hold that what makes an option part of my good depends on contingent features of agency other than my concerns, such as my species membership.⁴ Yet I do not know of any such accounts that purport to offer this sort of grounding for our reasons in the kinds of cases I mean to be drawing our attention to. I will assume that it is agreed on all sides that what grounds our reasons in some of the cases where our reasons are most obviously determined by contingent features of ourselves, is our favorable or positive reaction broadly construed.

An Aristotelian could say that it is because of our nature that our wants have the authority, at least in some spheres, to determine whether we have most reason to X or Y. Thus they would be offering an account of why

⁴For a recent and influential take on this Aristotelian theme (see Foot, 2001; Hursthouse, 1999). For criticisms of these views see Copp and Sobel, 2004, esp. pp. 525–543.

desires have authority to determine our reasons which is not itself subjectivist. Indeed, such a story might have it that in some creatures desires have no such authority. Yet, such a story would need to appeal to our preference for X over Y to account for our stronger reason to get X rather than Y.⁵ Thus, according to such a theory, the desire would be part of what makes it the case that we have such a reason. Absent the desire for X the account would not point the agent towards X. Indeed, absent the preference for X over Y, according to such an account, it would not be true that one had more reason to get X rather than Y. And thus such a view would, in my sense, be only weakly objectivist. Now a view of this type might avoid such a subjectivist element by claiming that the power of desire to ground such reasons is usurped by something else, perhaps something that desire tracks but does not constitute. But it would take a plausible story of this kind to vindicate strong objectivism.

This might lead us to want to make a distinction between different levels of objectivism and subjectivism. On the one hand, the sort of Aristotelian theory discussed above answers the question of why desires (or whatever) have authority to ground reasons. That is, a view might have an account of how desires earn their authority which does not itself look subjectivist. Different theories might vindicate the claim that desires sometimes are part of the truth-maker of particular reasons claims in different ways, just as contractualist accounts might vindicate consequentialist outcomes. Call the ultimately justifying theory here “meta-ethical” and the account of what grounds particular reasons “normative”. Thus it is possible, though hardly likely, that an Aristotelian meta-ethical objectivist account might vindicate a normatively subjectivist account.⁶ I am here concerned with the normative dimension and it seems to me that Scanlon and Parfit are also generally concerned with the normative dimension.

Many interesting and important issues arise in Scanlon’s and Parfit and case against subjectivism, but I want to focus attention mainly on their attempt to account for reasons of mere taste within a strongly objectivist framework.

⁵It is for this reason that I think Smith’s position in his 1994 need not be thought of as committing him to strong objectivism. After all, his own preferred way of handling matters of mere taste is to posit that perhaps ideally informed agents would converge on desires that would have them treat their own preferences as authoritative in some matters of mere taste. See pp. 170–171. This is just to say that our contingent desires do have authority in such contexts, even if only because all ideally rational agents would converge on such a view.

⁶I am most grateful to Phil Clark for helping me understand this distinction. The above formulation of the distinction and argument for it are all his, although I am not sure he continues to stand behind this formulation.

SCANLON

Scanlon holds that desires in the standard Humean sense never or almost never motivate or provide normative reasons for actions. Scanlon seems to think that the Humean account of desire would focus only on dispositions to act (rather than, additionally, on dispositions to have feelings of regret or shame, feelings of identification or endorsement, etc.).⁷ “But when we focus on this mere urge to act, separated from any evaluative element, it does not in fact fit very well with what we ordinarily mean by desire.” (Scanlon, 1998, p. 38.) I take it that Scanlon holds that these brute dispositions, although obviously associated with movement, cannot underwrite motivated action as opposed to mere behavior. This leads Scanlon to develop a notion of a desire that he thinks could play a motivationally effective role and that seems to him more like what we ordinarily have in mind when we speak of desires in non-philosophical contexts. He develops an account which he calls the “directed-attention” sense of desire. “A person has a desire in the directed-attention sense that P if the thought of P keeps occurring to him or her in a favorable light, that is to say, if the person’s attention is directed insistently towards considerations that present themselves as counting in favor of P.” (Scanlon, 1998, p. 39).

Several strong objectivists claim that having a desire to X requires one to see some reason, or be appeared to as if there were a reason, to X. And this seems to imply that to have a desire to X requires one to see or be appeared to as if there were a non-desire based reason to X, lest there be an infinite regress. But in simple matters of taste, such as my preference for diet Coke over diet Pepsi, it is hard to see what these non-desire based reasons could be thought to be or could seem to be. Raz suggests that if there is no desire-independent rationale for a desire, then the desire must be an alien impulse with no authority.⁸ I find it hard to believe he means to say such a thing about my soda preference.

Scanlon tells us that his thinking about desires was influenced by considerations that Warren Quinn highlighted.⁹ Quinn argued that, in Scanlon’s words, desire “understood simply as a functional state of being disposed to act in a certain way, lacks the power to rationalize action.” (Scanlon, 1998, p. 43). Quinn, mistakenly according to Scanlon, thought that if we add to our notion of desire the missing evaluative element, the resulting

⁷See Copp and Sobel (2002) for a critical discussion of a broad range of issues that arise in Scanlon’s treatment of reasons, especially issues about Scanlon’s understanding of desire and its role. Perhaps the dominant contemporary account of what makes something a desire is given by the “direction of fit” account in Smith (1994). But, for worries about such an account, see Sobel and Copp (2001).

⁸Raz (1999, p. 57).

⁹For example in Quinn (1993), especially “Putting Rationality in its Place”.

account of desire would have the power to rationalize action. But “even if we shift our attention to desires that have this kind of evaluative content (as the directed-attention account of desires do) we find, I believe, that they have surprisingly little force as sources of reasons.” (Scanlon, 1998, p. 43).

Scanlonian desires do not provide reasons, he holds, because (among other reasons) one can have them in the face of the judgment that the apparent reason that is part of one’s Scanlonian desire is no good reason.¹⁰ Further, what matters, according to Scanlon, is whether or not the object of desire will have certain intrinsically reason-giving features rather than whether it seems to one that it will have those features.¹¹ So what are the ultimately reason-giving features?¹²

One part of Scanlon’s answer to this question is especially relevant to our topic. Scanlon writes, that

It is easy to accept the claim that my reasons for eating coffee ice cream and for going to the seashore rather than to the mountains depend on the fact that these things appeal

¹⁰Scanlon allows that there may be one exception to the claim that desires do not provide reasons. He allows that it might be the case that the fact that I just “felt like” doing something might be a reason for doing A rather than B. But note three things about this concession: (1) Scanlon seems to be here granting reason-giving status not to Humean desires but rather to desires in his directed-attention sense (2) Scanlon says that such situations where Scanlonian desires perhaps give reasons are “special, rather trivial cases” and (3) the wide-ranging reasons that Scanlon holds that pleasure or enjoyment provide are explicitly contrasted with the reasons that “just feeling like it” perhaps provide. Thus I think this concession puts very little pressure on the claim that Scanlon is defending strong objectivism. See *Ibid.*, p. 47–48.

¹¹As Darwall, 2001, p. 143 notes, on Scanlon’s conception the role of desire is “epistemic rather than that of a practical reason or a ground of a practical reason.”

¹²Scanlon takes the notion of a reason as primitive. By this, he at least means to say that true propositions about what we have good reason to do resist “identification with any proposition about the natural world.” *Ibid.*, p. 57. I am not sure I understand exactly what view Scanlon has in this area. But it might seem that Scanlon accepts a Moorian account of what ultimately grounds all reasons, thus that he would resist the thought, which I soon attribute to him, that pleasure and pain ground reasons. Two things are of note. First, Scanlon is quite happy, as we will see, to make such general claims about when we have reasons and even to make general claims about what sorts of thing, such as pleasure and enjoyment, are an original source of, or give one, reasons (*Ibid.*, pp. 41–49 and “Replies”, p. 339). Further, in personal communication, Scanlon is explicit that although desires may co-vary with reasons, they do not ground reasons in the way that pleasure does ground reasons. This would be hard to understand if we interpreted him in a fully Moorian way in which only non-natural properties ground reasons. Second, Scanlon resists the idea that his view grounds reasons in non-natural ontology (see *Ibid.* pp. 62–63). But if I am wrong about Scanlon’s aspirations here, then what I say would only be relevant to those attempting to use this framework to find a non-desire based grounding for our reasons of mere that does not appeal to a non-natural realm.

to me. And this is true not only of reasons that are trivial or have to do with “matters of taste.” My reasons to help and support my friends and loved ones, for example, depend on the fact that they are my friends and loved ones, hence on my affection for them. But this dependence on my feelings does not render those reasons trivial; far from it. The acceptance of subjective conditions in these cases is easy to explain. A large part of the point of eating ice cream or taking a vacation is doing something that I will enjoy, so one’s “subjective reactions” are obviously of prime significance to the reasons one has for doing these things one way rather than another. (Scanlon, 1998, p. 42).

But there are subjective conditions and then there are subjective conditions. Scanlon focuses on what he thinks of as one significant original source of reasons, namely enjoyment, in explaining how the strong objectivist can allow “subjective conditions” into her account. But I think that enjoyment is an ambiguous term here and disambiguating the term reveals that enjoyment cannot play the role that Scanlon envisages.

Enjoyment, like pleasure, can be understood either in a way that conceptually involves the agent having a desire for the option or in a way that does not. The former approach might involve calling a state pleasurable iff it is intrinsically wanted for its own sake and what is wanted is the way it feels when it is occurring. The latter approach could suggest that pleasure or enjoyment are unified by their phenomenological commonality. Thus pleasure might be thought to be a distinctive flavor of sensation or distinctive flavors of sensations that bear a family resemblance, where such a feeling or feelings are not necessarily wanted for their own sake. The experience of pins and needles provides an example of the sort of phenomenological understanding we have of some concepts that have no conceptual connection to desire.

Henry Sidgwick disambiguated these two conceptions of pleasure and opted for the former usage. He writes

Shall we say that there is a measurable quality of feeling expressed by the word “pleasure,” which is independent of its relation to volition, and strictly indefinable from its simplicity? – like the quality of feeling expressed by the feeling “sweet,” of which also we are conscious in varying degrees of intensity. This seems to be the view of some writers: but, for my own part, when I reflect on the notion of pleasure – using the term in the comprehensive sense which I have adopted to include the most refined and subtle intellectual and emotional gratifications, no less than the coarser and more refined sexual enjoyments – the only common quality that I can find in the feeling so designated seems to be that relation to desire and volition expressed by the general term “desirable” [...]. (Sidgwick, 1981, p. 127).¹³

¹³ It may well be that Sidgwick is not making quite the point I would like to highlight. While he clearly disowns a Benthamite conception of pleasure, it may well be that he avoids ultimately endorsing a subjectivist friendly gloss on “desirable” despite doing very valuable work in developing such a view. See pp. 105–115 for his view concerning what makes a state desirable. See also Shaver, 1997 and my 1997.

The central point here is not that our broad understanding of pleasures and pains do not, as Sidgwick rightly insisted, form a simple phenomenological kind, but rather that we must choose between the phenomenological understanding of the term and the desire-based understanding of the term. The former point is perhaps a bit of an embarrassment to someone who wants to make use of the notion of pleasure or enjoyment across a broad range of situations as Scanlon does. But it is the latter distinction that spells real trouble for Scanlon and any strong objectivist attempt to use pleasure and pain and their relatives to play the role of what Scanlon calls “subjective conditions” in their understanding of reasons.¹⁴

Scanlon would seem to have to reject the desire-based understanding of pleasure and pain, at least insofar as the notion of desire here is the Humean one that he has insisted is almost never an original source of reasons. Thus he would have to embrace the phenomenological notion. We will see eventually that Scanlon partially resists this move to the non-desire based phenomenological conception of pleasure and pain. But for now merely note that these considerations put pressure on Scanlon to accept the phenomenological notion of pleasure lest he allow that the discarded notion of desire is actually playing a crucial role in making it the case that one has a reason to do this or that.

Thus it seems that Scanlon needs (and, we shall see, wants) a phenomenological rather than desire-based notion of pleasure and pain. But if we embrace this conception of pleasure and pain, how plausible is it that they are original sources of reasons? We need to remind ourselves that these phenomenal states are conceived as having no conceptual connection to desires. Of course it could be that as the result of a common evolutionary history all or almost all humans in fact favor this flavor of sensation, but that will be a contingent fact, not ensured by the conception of pleasure we are employing.

Now suppose that we run into someone that tells us that they do not like the flavor of sensation that is, on this proposal, pleasure. We will perhaps initially be surprised and wonder if they are really feeling the same sensation that we are. Or we may wonder if they are in the grips of some ascetic worldview or if they think that enjoying such sensations is shameful before God. But these must be empirical hypotheses that could be falsified. It must be metaphysically possible, on this conception of pleasure, that someone not like it. We would perhaps be similarly surprised if we learned that someone did not like the taste of chocolate or did like the taste of dirt – we would in the first instance reach for explanations that did

¹⁴The attentive reader will have noticed that I have switched from Scanlon’s term “enjoyment” to talking instead of “pleasure.” Scanlon, as we will see, when pressed on these issues, prefers to use pleasure as his central case.

not entail that they really do not like what we find so easy to like or that they really do like what we find so disgusting. But eventually, surely, there could be evidence that these surprising tastes are really theirs. We could, of course, always plead inverse qualia in cases like this, but that will often seem an unwarrantedly drastic understanding of what is going on. In any case, insisting that certain qualia are necessarily liked seems a surprising path for a strong objectivist to insist on in vindicating the reason-giving power of that qualia independent of desire.

So let it be that we finally find someone who really does not like the flavor of sensation of pleasure. Should we think that this person is necessarily making some sort mistake? Well what mistake would it be? I myself do not understand what sort of mistake could be thought to be necessarily involved in a failure to like this or that phenomenological state. We will see later that Parfit agrees. To disagree would be, I take it, to say that certain flavors of sensation are intrinsically more worthy of pursuit than others independently of one's reaction to those flavors. It is compatible with such a view to hold that people who are cut off from such flavors, perhaps because they lack the relevant capacities, lack a reason to taste the things that gives the rest of us the relevant flavors. But anyone who has the relevant capacities, on such a view, would presumably have a reason to experience that flavor of sensation regardless of their response to that flavor. This move is analogous to the thought that everyone has more reason to taste chocolate rather than strawberry ice cream as the former is intrinsically more valuable flavor. This is something most of us say only when joking. Of course we might say that certain flavors are better than others meaning that the overwhelming majority of competent judges in some sense find favor with such flavors, and on this basis we expect this to be true of those we advise on the topic. But this surely does not vindicate the thought that dissenting competent judges have any reason to defer to the majority in their own tastes.¹⁵

Given the historical significance of versions of hedonism that claim a phenomenological commonality between pleasures, it is surprisingly obscure what can be said by way of vindicating the reason-giving status of such states. Indeed, it is a bit obscure what could be said by way of

¹⁵I find J.S. Mill's competent judges test both importantly congenial to the subjectivist position and confusing in many ways. He appears to think that the higher pleasures are determined by what the vast majority of competent judges prefer. And he appears to think that higher pleasures are better for all that can appreciate them than lower pleasures. Thus we might be forced to conclude that Mill thinks that if dissenting competent judges are significantly outvoted, even in matters of taste, then getting what the majority prefer is better for the dissenting judges (so long as the dissenting judge remains capable of appreciating the "higher" pleasure). The implausibility of this conclusion, and that such a view would seriously conflict with claims Mill makes in *On Liberty*, is some reason to seek a different interpretation of Mill. See also his *Utilitarianism*.

explaining why the Benthamite hedonist focuses on the phenomenology of pleasure rather than the feeling of pins and needles, given that the hedonist has abandoned any claim that pleasure has any necessary connection to desire. Most likely pleasure seemed a uniquely plausible recommendation partially because the vast majority of actual people like it. But of course, in other possible worlds, most people do not like that sensation. What could then be said on behalf of the sensation of pleasure?

Scanlon's strategy seems to preclude his claiming that the ground of the reason is not that the object in some sense finds favor with us (even under conditions ideal for appreciating what the object is like) but rather that we ought to find favor with it. This move is problematic for Scanlon because it is a move away from grounding our reasons in our subjective reactions (as Scanlon had wanted to) and towards grounding our appropriate subjective reactions in antecedent facts about our reasons. Nor will it help to appeal to an agent judging that or being appeared to as if she has a reason in this matter of mere taste. For we are seeking a possible grounding of such beliefs or appearances. Unless we believe that in this arena merely thinking it makes it so, we will have to find some further thing that vindicates such judgments or appearances.

In a recent paper, David Copp and I very briefly discussed concerns we had about Scanlon's use of pleasure and pain that are due to the ambiguities in the understanding of these concepts mentioned above (Copp and Sobel, 2002, pp. 271–272). Scanlon clearly understood the nature of our worry and responds that

The nature of pleasure and pain is a difficult question, but I agree that it is plausible to suppose that an experience is pleasant, or enjoyable, only if, among other things, the subject desires it while it is occurring. But this does not make a case in which we have reason to do something because it will be enjoyable an instance of our having a reason to do something because it will fulfill a desire. The desire that is a crucial element in pleasant experience is a desire that the subject has *while the experience in question is occurring*. Therefore, considered in relation to the act of bringing about that experience, it is a future desire. This raises two points. First, if this desire is to be the basis of one's reason to bring about a pleasant experience, according to the view that we must have reason to do something if it will fulfill our desires, this view must be extended to include future desires. This extended view is quite coherent, but it involves separation between the justifying role of desires and their role in moving us to act. Second, it is worth asking why the desire must be one that the subject has while the experience is occurring. If the role of the desire were just to render experience valuable qua object of desire, it would seem that the desire could just as well be prospective. But a purely prospective desire does not make an experience pleasant. I conclude from this that desire plays a role in pleasure by affecting the experience itself. When we have reason to bring about an experience in virtue of its being pleasant, what we have reason to bring about is a complex experiential whole that involves, say, having a certain sensation while also desiring that this sensation occur. So these cases remain ones in which the quality of the experience (considered broadly) is a reason to bring it about, rather than cases of

having a reason to do something because it will fulfill some desire. (Scanlon, 2002, p. 339–340).¹⁶

Scanlon says a lot in this paragraph and so we will have to consider his points one at a time. First, he says that a state only counts as pleasurable if it is desired when it occurs. Perhaps, since Scanlon here says that he is agreeing with Copp and myself, he means one to understand the desire that is at least a necessary condition for a state to count as pleasure, not in his directed attention sense, but rather in the standard Humean sense. But in any case, note that Scanlon's notion of desire in the directed attention sense would seem unable to ground reasons because of considerations that Scanlon does not address. To have a desire to O in his sense is to be insistently appeared to as if there were a reason to O. But, on pain of regress, that apparent reason could not be a further desire in the directed attention sense. For surely the apparent reason one has to O could not be that one is appeared to as if one had a reason to O. Scanlon is right that desires in his sense could not ground reasons.

Second, Scanlon says that if desire-based views are to allow pleasure in this sense to count directly as creating a reason, they must allow that future desires (for occurrent experiences) create reasons. Scanlon allows that this "extension" by the subjectivist account is "quite coherent." We will see later that Parfit denies that this extension is coherent within a subjectivist framework.

Third, Scanlon, in the indented paragraph above, says, "it is worth asking why the desire must be one that the subject has while the experience is occurring. If the role of the desire were just to render experience valuable qua object of desire, it would seem that the desire could just as well be prospective. But a purely prospective desire does not make an experience pleasant." It seems that Scanlon is assuming that subjectivists must explain why desires for occurrent experiences have a special role to play in creating reasons. A subjectivist could simply deny that there is any such need. A subjectivist could say that what makes an experience count as pleasurable is that it is intrinsically liked for its own sake when it is occurring, but that such desires have no special status when compared to other, perhaps prospective desires, in determining reasons. Thus it is not clear that there is pressure on the subjectivist to have a theory of pleasure.

But even if a subjectivist conceded that we must explain why such desires for occurrent phenomenology have a kind of authority that other desires lack, there are several ways of doing so. One could argue quite generally for a

¹⁶Scanlon allows that this alternation makes trouble for a component of his view that he is now less committed to, namely that "having a desire for something [...] involves seeing some feature or features of that thing as reason-providing." (Scanlon, 1998, p. 337).

special authority for some of what R.M. Hare called “now for now” and “then for then” desires over “now for then” and “then for now” desires. One could claim that the former desires about occurrent phenomenology have a special authority because they are formed under conditions of unique access to the object of the desire. Typically subjectivists claim that only desires that are properly informed about their object have special authority.¹⁷ And a person who is currently experiencing a particular feeling has a unique authority over what that feeling is like and thus is in a privileged position to evaluate whether and how much such a state is liked.¹⁸

Finally, Scanlon’s most important claim in the above passage comes at the end and is puzzling. The first thing to say is that Scanlon appears to be searching for a novel account of pleasure and pain – one that is not exactly either of the two options Sidgwick disambiguated. It seems that he is saying that although a desire of a certain kind for an occurrent phenomenological state is a necessary condition for that state to count as pleasure, that we desire the phenomenological state does not help make it the case that we have a reason to bring about the state. Rather, our reason stems from the phenomenology “broadly construed”. Such a view hopes to avoid calling a feeling pleasure when that feeling is not liked when it is experienced, and thus hopes to mimic the results of a subjectivist account of our reasons of mere taste by allowing that desires track, but do not determine, many or all of our reasons of mere taste. Such a view appears to be able to recommend that in matters of mere taste we should choose that which we desire, while maintaining that we should not choose the option because we desire it. We will see that this appearance is misleading.

Scanlon’s proposal leaves several unanswered questions. Should we understand the desire that is conjoined with the phenomenological state to be a Humean desire or a Scanlonian desire? Is the existence of the desire supposed partially to cause the phenomenological state? What is this phenomenological state? What does it feel like? Or can Scanlon allow that

¹⁷ Mill, 1979, Chapter 2; Sidgwick, 1981, p. 111–112; Brandt, 1979, pp. 10, 113 and 329; Hare, 1981, pp. 101–105 and 214–216. See also Senor and Fotion (eds.), 1990, pp. 217–218; Griffin, 1986 pp. 11–17; Rawls, 1971, pp. 407–424; Gauthier, 1986, chapter 2; Darwall, 1983, part II; Peter Railton, 1986, pp. 5–31; Lewis, 1989, pp. 113–137; Harsanyi, 1973, p. 55. Several important caveats apply to some of the above authors’ commitments to subjectivism and some would decline the label.

¹⁸ It is often complained against subjectivism that it cannot account for the differential authority between, for example, informed and uninformed desires. See, for example, Smith, 1994, p. 145. But this is mistaken. The animating thought behind subjectivism is that one’s preferences between options carry authority. One’s misinformed preference for A over B will not be a preference for what A actually is over what B actually is. Only informed preferences our subjectivist can say, are for one option as it actually is over the other as it is. A strong desire for “pineapple” where one has a seriously misguided understanding of what pineapple tastes like is, in an important sense, not really for pineapple.

there need be no phenomenological commonality between pleasures, yet maintain that it is the feeling, not the desire, that creates the reason? How broadly is the phenomenological state supposed to ground our reasons? Is it supposed to ground all reasons of mere taste? More reasons than this? Does such a state ground *pro tanto* reasons to choose immoral options? Does the intensity of the phenomenological state vary in degree according to the extent of the desire for it? Assuming that desire and the phenomenology co-occur as Scanlon holds, why should we think it is the phenomenology that grounds the reason? Absent an answer to such questions, it is more difficult to assess Scanlon's proposal.

Nonetheless, the view is clear enough to evaluate. As I understand it, Scanlon holds that a phenomenological state counts as pleasure only if the agent experiencing the state desires that phenomenological state while she is experiencing it. Yet, he holds, it is pleasure's phenomenology, rather than the fact that one desires it, that grounds reasons in matters of mere taste. This view aims to avoid recommending that we choose options that we do not like in matters of mere taste without granting that desires are reason-grounding.

Let me offer a few reasons why I think Scanlon's proposal here is implausible. The view could either suggest that desire affects the reason-giving phenomenology or resist this thought. We will see that Scanlon opts for the former view, but it is also worth exploring the option Scanlon does not choose to see why it is not worth choosing.

So, to start, suppose that it is held that an occurrent phenomenological state only counts as pleasure if it is desired when it is occurring, but that the desire does not alter the content of the phenomenological state. Then, of course, the view would claim that it is the phenomenological state of pleasure, not the desire, that creates reasons. But now the view has to be that P1, a phenomenal state that is desired by G at T1, grounds the agent's reason to get P1 at T1, but that P1 does not ground a reason for G to get P1 at T2 when the phenomenological state is no longer desired. The grounds of the reason at T1 are replicated at T2 but the reason disappears. The allegedly grounding state, P1, remains unchanged yet the change in desire changes the reasons. Thus the view would have to be that reasons do not supervene on their grounds. The problem here is that the allegedly grounding phenomenological state has no content other than being a state liked when it is experienced. But without a content to the experience, there is nothing there that could, in the absence of the desire, ground the reason.

Thus let us consider the other option, the one that Scanlon in fact recommends. Recall that he holds that "desire plays a role in pleasure by affecting the experience itself". With this move, Scanlon seems to be able to avoid the above problem. Now there seemingly could not be two people, or one person at two times, who have the same grounding phenomenology, but

different reasons. Now there is content to the notion of pleasure beyond merely being a phenomenological state that is liked while it is occurring, something needed if it is to be held that the phenomenological state itself grounds the reason.

The first problem with this view is that it owes us an account of the affect of desire on the phenomenology. That is, if the reason-grounding phenomenology can be specified as not merely a phenomenology that is liked, how is it to be specified? The natural first thought, surely, would be to look for a distinctive phenomenological consequence of liking a state, and holding that this is the feel that is added to the liked phenomenology. But is there a distinctive phenomenological consequence of liking a state? If so, what does it feel like? This gives Scanlon the age old problem for hedonistic proposals of finding a phenomenological commonality in all pleasurable states. Recall that Sidgwick searched in vain for this “common quality” to the broad range of pleasures we are capable of. I also doubt that there is a phenomenological commonality to the broad range of states that Scanlon thinks of as pleasure.

I find this challenge to Scanlon’s proposal daunting, but the most telling objection to Scanlon’s proposal is still to come. Suppose that Scanlon can answer the previous worry and can point to a “common quality” that is added to liked phenomenological states because they are liked. That is, suppose it is true that “desire plays a role in pleasure by affecting the experience itself” where this means not merely that the experience is affected in the sense that it is thereby desired, but that the feel of the experience is changed in a characteristic way as a result of being liked. I believe that this is Scanlon’s proposal.

Now consider the question of whether or not this altered phenomenological state is itself liked while it is being experienced. It would seem that just because the phenomenology is affected by my liking the initial phenomenology, it need not be that the phenomenological contribution that liking makes must itself be liked. Call the old, pre-affected by the liking phenomenology, P1, and the affected by the liking phenomenology P2. We have seen that Scanlon needs to and does hold that there is a difference between P1 and P2. His view requires that we like P1. It does not ensure that we like P2 (even more tellingly it also does not ensure that we prefer P2 to P1, but I omit this additional thought hereafter). Yet his view is that it is P2 that is pleasure and grounds our reasons of mere taste.

Should Scanlon hold that P2 must itself be liked for the way it feels if it is to count as pleasure and if it is to ground a reason? Well, consider either answer. If it is held that P2 must itself be liked for the way it feels in order to ground reasons, then the phenomenology of P2 again could not be held to itself ground the reason. And this for the same reason we saw above. For again two different people (or one person at two times) could be in state

P2 and one like it and one not. On this view, the reasons would differ for the two situations, yet the allegedly grounding phenomenal state remains the same. Again, reasons would not supervene on their grounds.

So consider the other view, that P2 need not be liked for the way it feels in order to count as pleasure and in order to ground reasons of mere taste. On this view a phenomenological state, P2, even one disliked when it is experienced, is pleasure and grounds reasons of mere taste. Of course, what this phenomenal state feels like is a hard question for Scanlon that we have put aside. But if Scanlon were willing to say that a phenomenological state counts as pleasure and grounds reasons even if it is intrinsically disliked, then it is hard to see the justification for the original claim that a state must be desired to count as pleasure. Such a move seems simply to backhandedly acknowledge the normative force of desire while trying to repackage this acknowledgment in a way that looks compatible with a strongly objectivist framework. If a particular flavor of sensation could vindicate our reason to do something, there would be no need for this circuitous route. We could simply be told that although a person might not like the sensation of pleasure, nonetheless they have reasons to bring about that sensation in themselves for its own sake. It is the seemingly tacitly acknowledged implausibility of such a story that best explains the move towards bringing in desires, rather than the plausibility of the claim that (some) desires have a reason-giving phenomenology. Scanlon's notion of pleasure looks rigged up in just such a way as to not conflict with the direction desire points, yet allows him to say that desires never ground reasons. But, as we have seen, even this rigged up story cannot deliver what Scanlon must have been hoping for – a phenomenological state that grounds reasons without conflicting with the direction that desire recommends. The added complexity of Scanlon's view fails to improve on a simple Benthamite hedonistic account of our reasons of mere taste.¹⁹ We reviewed the widely acknowledged implausibility of such a story earlier in the paper.

Ruth Chang, in response to an earlier version of this paper, suggests that my argument against Scanlon fails because I falsely suppose that what is co-present with a reason-giving state must itself be reason-giving.²⁰ Chang is right that this is a bad argument, but it is not the argument I have made. Rather I have claimed that strong objectivists have no account of

¹⁹I am especially indebted to Janice Dowell for help with this part of the paper.

²⁰Chang, 2004, p. 64. It might be that Chang thought that I meant to conclude simply from the failure of the Scanlonian account that desire-based accounts of our reasons of mere taste must be right. But I do not see such a direct connection. Rather the failure of the Scanlonian account puts pressure on the strong objectivist to show that they can offer a better account of such reasons than desire-based accounts can. Desire accounts have, I would say, a very plausible story about our reasons of mere taste. The desire account does not yet have a plausible rival in this domain.

what pleasure is such that it looks to be a genuine source of reasons. The reason strong objectivists need to keep bringing desire into their account of pleasure is not that desire merely happens to track some genuinely reason-giving state, but rather that we have before us no other plausible story about the grounding of our reasons of mere taste.

PARFIT

Parfit also claims that “desire-based theories are mistaken. On the kind of value-based theory that I accept, no reasons are provided by desires.” (Parfit, 2001, p. 16). One of Parfit’s main arguments for this view is that, according to a desire-based view,

we cannot have any reason, given by facts about some thing, to want this thing for its own sake. Such a reason would have to be provided by our wanting this thing. But the fact that we had this desire could not give us a reason to have it. So we cannot have intrinsic reasons, given by the nature of your suffering, to want that suffering to end [...] The difference between mild pain and agony cannot itself provide a reason, since this difference is not a fact about our present desire. (Parfit, 2001, p. 23).

He soon adds

According to them (desire-based theories) instrumental reasons get their force, not from some intrinsic reason, but from some intrinsic desire. And on such theories, as we have seen, we cannot have reasons to have such desires. So all reasons get their force from some desire that, on these theories, we have no reason to have. Our having such desires cannot itself, I am arguing, give us any reasons. If that is true, desire-based theories are built on sand.” (Parfit, 2001, p. 24–25).

Parfit seems to find it implausible to say that we have no intrinsic reasons that stem from the nature of suffering or agony to avoid such sensations or choose milder to stronger versions of such sensations.²¹ He then goes on to offer his general diagnosis of the problem with desire-based views.²² I think Parfit’s understanding here of the implications of desire-based views is accurate. But, I think these results should be, at least in some cases, welcomed. Keep in mind that our main question in this paper is not whether subjectivism is true, but rather if there are general kinds of reasons that stem from desires. Thus, all I need to argue here is that there is a class of cases in

²¹As Parfit seems to recognize, a subjectivist can make sense of instrumental reasons to have intrinsic desires. Thus the complaint must be that the subjectivist cannot make room for intrinsic reasons to have intrinsic desires.

²²Parfit uses the term “desire-based” accounts to refer to the accounts he means to be rejecting. I think he uses desire-based in the way that I explained “subjective accounts” early in this paper. In any case, I use the two interchangeably.

which the results that Parfit accurately draws from desire-based accounts should be welcomed.

Again the key initial move is to ask what understanding Parfit has of pain, agony, and suffering. Again one could have a conception of each of these terms that conceptually involved desire or one could have a purely phenomenological account of each. As before, neither path looks attractive for the strong objectivist. If Parfit adopted a purely phenomenological account of these terms, then it would be plausible to claim that it is a contingent question whether or not there would be a desire-based reason to not have such experiences. It would depend on whether or not the agent liked such sensations or did not like them. Again of course, we would be very surprised if a human liked sensations worthy of being called pain or agony, but it must be allowed that this is coherent on the phenomenological conception of these terms.²³ Parfit thinks the fact that desire-based accounts cannot vindicate an intrinsic reason to avoid such feelings based in the way they feel is obviously a serious criticism of such views. But why should he think this? Doesn't whether or not a person has a reason to avoid such a flavor of sensation depend on whether or not she likes those feelings? Or is Parfit suggesting that she has reason to avoid such feelings even if she likes them? And if Parfit's answer to this last question is yes, is Parfit further suggesting that this is so clearly the case that we can use this view as a compelling premise against desire-based accounts of reasons?

In fact it is confusing what Parfit is suggesting. He writes that

[It is] the likings or dislikings of our own present conscious states that make these states pleasant, painful, or unpleasant. We could not have intrinsic object-given reasons for or against having these dislikes, nor could they be rational or irrational. If some people like sensations that other people hate, neither group are making evaluative mistakes. Other non-rational desires include such instinctive urges as those involved in thirst, hunger, or a non-belief-dependent desire to sleep. (Parfit, 2001, p. 26).

Here, like Scanlon, Parfit allows that desires are crucially involved in making a state count as pleasant or unpleasant and he allows that a state's being pleasant or unpleasant for oneself is an intrinsic reason to bring about or avoid that state, yet he nevertheless maintains that no reasons are grounded by desires.²⁴ This is confusing. The reasons I offered above to reject Scanlon's similar proposal are also reasons to reject Parfit's proposal. In fact, in conversation Scanlon refers to Parfit view in this area and his own as "our" view.

²³In some cases, "agony" is a good example, the phenomenological conception of the term will strain linguistic usage. I think it sounds incoherent to say a person might not mind being in agony. Thus I find the desire-involving understanding of this term a better understanding of this concept.

²⁴In context, Parfit is explicit that the notion of liking he uses here is in the camp of desire.

Parfit's main complaint against desire-accounts, recall, is that they tell us that our reasons stem from desires that we have no reason to have. And this is supposed to make us feel that desire accounts are built on sand. But now we learn that there are no good reasons to have a desire for this rather than that when it comes to a whole class of likes and dislikes. That is, absent one's preferring chocolate over vanilla there are no good object-given reasons, Parfit allows, for going for one over the other. Yet Parfit seems to allow that we have reason to follow our preferences in these cases. He tells us that we generally have reason to seek pleasure and avoid pain and what makes pleasure pleasure and pain pain is our liking or not liking certain states in cases where there are no sufficient object-given reasons to choose one over the other. How then can Parfit complain against desire-accounts that they sometimes allow that it is desires that we have no reason to have that provide us with reasons? What is supposed to be the reason that is not built on sand to avoid pain? There is, by Parfit's admission, no object-given reason. And the reasons of pleasure must await our liking the qualitative state and we can make no mistake in liking or disliking any qualitative state. I think Parfit must confess that if there are reasons here, they really are built on sand and that that is firm enough to stand upon.

If there is too much constraint on what it is claimed we ought to have a certain favorable reaction towards, it will look as if what we have reason to do is already set, not determined by our favorable reactions. So if finding favor is itself, at least in part, to ground a kind of reason, then those favorable reactions must not already be reactions that we have that kind of reason to have. The sandy foundation Parfit rejects as unable to support reasons must be capable of supporting reasons if finding favor is to help ground some of our reasons.

Parfit does say that one way of having an irrational desire is to be future Tuesday indifferent, that is, for no further reason, to not care about things one ordinarily cares about on other days when they occur on Tuesdays. Of course, when Tuesday rolls around, one will care about what happens on Tuesday, but one now lacks any concern for what happens then. Parfit claims that "these predictable future desires do not, on desire-based theories, give her now any reason" to concern herself with what will occur on Tuesdays. "If we appeal to such future desires, claiming that they give this person such a reason, we are appealing to a value-based theory" which is the fundamental alternative to desire-based views. (Parfit, 2001, p. 24).

It might seem that this helps us understand why Parfit thinks he can allow that only if a phenomenological state is intrinsically desired does it count as pleasure, and allow that pleasure gives us reasons, yet claim that desires never give us reasons. Perhaps Parfit is thinking that this is all consistent because the future states of pleasure give us reasons now whether or not we desire them now and only a value-based theory can vindicate this thought.

But even this questionable terminological move is not enough to vindicate Parfit's view. For if this were the only reason Parfit had for resisting the thought that desires give reasons, he would have to allow that desires that one now has give one reasons and thus Parfit would have to abandon strong objectivism.

But it is odd that Parfit thinks that only a non-desire based view could vindicate the intrinsic reason giving power of future desires. I would have said just the reverse. Perhaps Parfit's seemingly exciting conclusion that desires never ground reasons is less exciting than it appears because of his odd terminological choice. Perhaps he thinks that it is compatible with the view that desires never provide reasons to say that future desires ultimately ground reasons.²⁵

CONCLUSION

Suppose we grant that our reasons in matters of mere taste are grounded by our contingent concerns. This will leave weak objectivism and subjectivism standing as options. Obviously subjectivism has a kind of simplicity going for it once the options are so narrowed, but I am not inclined to give this much weight in the decision between them. But which view has the more convincing story about why there is so obviously a subjective component of our reasons in the realm of mere taste? Scanlon, Parfit, and the subjectivist all agree that where one likes the way an occurrent bit of phenomenology feels, one has a reason to be in that state. Why is this so clear to everyone?

²⁵ Joseph Raz sometimes seems to commit himself to strong objectivism, but in other cases he seems to deny strong objectivism. In his 1999, p. 56, one of his central claims is that "there is always a reason for any desire." This would seem incompatible with the thought that in some cases desires are the ultimate grounds for some of our reasons. Sometimes Raz appears to be saying that there is always a desire-independent reason for having any desire that is in good order and that, as a conceptual matter, the agent must not want the desire to count in favor of the desired option except to the extent that there are other, independent reasons to choose the option. (p. 62) At these moments, pleasure is put forward as a likely legitimate reason-giving ground. (p. 52).

But later Raz tells us that wants themselves can ground reasons. When we ask whether the fact that I prefer A to B provides a reason for A over B, and he tells us, we can legitimately answer affirmatively. Sometimes Raz tries to belittle such "reasons" as when he says that "our wants become relevant when reasons have run their course." (p. 63) But I take it that the official view is that "the affirmative answer (to the above question) suggests that wants are here reasons." (p. 63) Other times Raz tries to limit the scope of such reasons. He only commits himself to the view that wants are reasons when the options being considered between have already been judged "acceptable," presumably by non-desire-based standards. (p. 62). This is an attempt to limit the subjectivist element in his weak objectivism, not an attempt to vindicate strong objectivism. Thus I do not think of Raz's view as a target of the thesis of this paper. However, Chang (2004, pp. 59–63) interprets Raz as a strong objectivist.

The subjectivist can offer the following explanation. The importance of the reason is not the key to understanding the obviousness of the subjective grounding of our reasons in matters of mere taste. Rather, the fact that in these cases we typically have or know how to achieve an uniquely authoritative access to the object of assessment explains why we find it so irresistible to grant special authority to our desires that are so informed. That is, the reason reasons of mere taste are so obviously dependent on our desires is because, our subjectivist will claim, quite generally our desires that are properly informed about the options we are choosing between have an obvious kind of authority. This sort of story helps vindicate subjectivism generally but explains the obviousness of the normative authority of desires in matters of mere taste as a function of our privileged epistemic access to the relevantly authoritative kinds of desires in the arena of mere tastes. If this is the best explanation for the authority of our desires in matters of mere taste, this is an advantage subjectivism has over weak objectivism.

But these last few moves take us well beyond the main claims of this paper. Here, I have argued that strong objectivists cannot vindicate the obvious fact that I sometimes have reason to do one thing rather than another in matters of mere taste and you have reason to do the opposite by following Scanlon and Parfit. Thus the obvious fact that we do have such reasons seems to me a fully sufficient reason to justify remaining skeptical about the prospects for strong objectivism until a more plausible account of such reasons are offered. If strong objectivism cannot provide this better account, it should be abandoned.

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Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, OH 43403
 USA
 Fax: (419) 372-8191
 E-mail: david_sobel@hotmail.com