

# Book Review

doi:[10.1017/S0953820818000262](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820818000262)

**David Sobel**, *From Valuing to Value: A Defense of Subjectivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. vii + 312.

This volume collects fourteen of David Sobel's previously published articles (including two co-authored with David Copp), dating from his early philosophical career in the 1990s up to 2011. It also includes one new essay. The book is a showcase of first-rate value theory in the analytic tradition, tightly situated in debates about the nature of well-being and the nature of normative reasons, with a few forays into moral theory and moral psychology.

The book might be described – and indeed this is how Sobel's own introduction describes it – as a defence of *subjectivism*. Actually, it is a defence of two specific subjectivisms: subjectivism about well-being and subjectivism about normative reasons. The former is the thesis that what is good for a person is dependent upon and explained by her non-cognitive attitudes (like desiring, caring, valuing, or favouring). Analogously, the latter says that what one has reason to do depends on and is explained by the person's non-cognitive attitudes. These subjectivist views contrast with objectivist views which deny these attitudinal dependencies and reject this order of explanation.

Sobel does not offer (and avowedly does not aspire to offer in this book) a thorough positive argument for subjectivism. Nor does he provide an elaborate story about why our non-cognitive attitudes must be reckoned at the core of our thinking about reasons and our good. Instead, Sobel suggests that such arguments may not be available, admitting that disputes between subjectivists and objectivists may need to be decided by overall tallies of advantages and disadvantages of the views – tallies of 'plausibility points' as David Enoch sometimes puts it. And plausibility points are to be awarded on an issue-by-issue basis.

As Sobel defends subjectivism and criticizes its rivals, we repeatedly find him in the trenches exchanging fire with Tim Scanlon and Derek Parfit, and, towards the end, Enoch. The likes of Peter Railton and Connie Rosati are Sobel's reliable comrades in arms. His relationships with Bernard Williams, Christine Korsgaard, Michael Smith and Mark Schroeder remain uneasy and interestingly complicated. All the while, Hume, Mill and Sidgwick are steady sources of inspiration.

An ever-present cast of philosophical friends and foes is to be expected, in light of Sobel's approach. In each chapter Sobel dives straight into the extant dialectic around a particular complication for subjectivism or its rivals. Major discussions focus on the relationship between moral reasons and internal

reasons for action, the appropriate idealization conditions in ideal responder theories of value and reasons, the relationships among reasons, rationality and motivation, the relationship between hedonism and subjectivism, and reasons given by sensations and tastes. The book also includes a few oddballs, less directly relevant to subjectivism: direction-of-fit accounts of desire and belief, the demandingness objection to consequentialism, and a survey of some developments in virtue ethics.

Sobel's treatment of these issues is lucid and even-handed. Most of all, it is careful, replete throughout with caveats and hedging. Sobel's path across the terrain is depth-first, pursuing each issue until reaching a satisfactory conclusion, rather than attempting to canvass a large area comprehensively. Hence, there is little in the way of grand theory building. In a characteristic discussion, we find Sobel criticizing Parfit by responding to Parfit's criticism of Smith's argument against Parfit. In these in-the-weeds discussions, readers may occasionally get the impression that Sobel has thought through the relevant issues more carefully than the authors whose work introduces them.

Despite Sobel's constant focus on arguments and views of other philosophers, prior familiarity with the relevant literature is not required in order to follow Sobel's arguments. Sobel is charitable, accurate, clear and sufficiently detailed in his expositions of others' positions. Indeed, Sobel's accessible avenues deep into these debates are among the most valuable features of these chapters.

Even if each chapter is admirable, we still might wonder about the value of such a volume on the whole. Many philosophers will be already familiar with many of the articles, most of which are easily available electronically. So, doesn't this new volume just complicate our lives, compelling us now to cite this book instead of the earlier versions? Must we transfer our highlights and marginal annotations from dog-eared article offprints over to this new volume? These are familiar dilemmas when a book like this arrives.

Fortunately, this volume offers more than the sum of its parts. Although Sobel adds little new content beyond the book's chapters, reading all the chapters together yields a gratifying result one might not have obtained otherwise: We begin to see the emergence of a unified view of reasons and well-being, where the connection to the subject's own evaluative standpoint is of fundamental importance.

The bits of new material in this book are valuable as well. The introduction provides a clear description of the sorts of subjectivism Sobel defends, plus an overview of the chapters. In addition to the one new essay (about which more below), the volume also includes a new appendix to Sobel's most cited essay, 'Full Information Accounts of Well-Being'. One of the essays, a critical discussion of Mark Schroeder's *Slaves of the Passions*, has been revised for this volume. An index spanning all the chapters is quite handy for finding discussions of particular topics.

Despite its virtues, this book is also mildly frustrating. Sobel does not do as much as we might have hoped to connect the dots among all the self-standing, in-depth discussions he provides.

Although Sobel tends to speak of subjectivism as a single view, and although he offers parallel defences of subjectivism about well-being and subjectivism about reasons, the views are distinct. And Sobel does not clearly articulate the relationship between the two. A key question in this vicinity is about how to distinguish the desires relevant to each. As Sobel argues in his chapter 4, the excellent and under-appreciated ‘Well-Being as the Object of Moral Consideration’, some desires seem to be reason-giving without being relevant to a person’s well-being. Although Sobel’s argument in that chapter does not require an account of how to circumscribe the respective sets of desires, a full subjectivist treatment of well-being would require such an account. Sobel problematizes this issue, surveying various attempts to solve it, but it would have been nice to hear more about the prospects for a solution or the implications for subjectivism about well-being if a solution proves elusive.

Another issue about which it would be nice to hear a bit more is the difficulty in providing an adequate specification of the ideal conditions in Sobel’s favourite subjectivist accounts of well-being and reasons, viz. full information accounts. This is a little frustrating. We find Sobel late in the book arguing that full information idealizations are well-motivated and in the subjectivist spirit (‘Subjectivism and Idealization’), but early in the book he offers a bleak prognosis for finding an adequate account of ideal conditions that might allow for evaluative comparisons of complex options (‘Full Information Accounts of Well-Being’). If the prospects are indeed so dim, how much does this affect the overall tally of pros and cons that is supposed to determine subjectivism’s fate?

Sobel’s most sustained discussion of the core insight guiding subjectivism is found in chapter 13, ‘Subjectivism and Idealization’. In that chapter, Sobel defends the likes of Williams and Railton from Enoch’s charge that idealization is unmotivated and ad hoc. Sobel’s defence of Williams and Railton is the same: idealization makes sense because the responder should be responsive to the evaluated object as it actually is. However, in chapter 7, Sobel objects to Williams’s account of idealization precisely because it yields incorrect results about cases that Railton’s account gets right. That appears to be an argument about the extensional adequacy of the views. The problem is that Sobel seems to agree with Enoch that such considerations are not the sort on which subjectivists should be basing arguments for idealization. I am not suggesting this is a serious flaw in Sobel’s argument, but it is a case where connecting the dots could have been illuminating.

For filling gaps and connecting dots, some additional supplementary material would have helped. For instance, brief addenda to each chapter, assessing how the chapter should affect our thinking about the overall prospects for subjectivism, would have been most welcome. Or perhaps a final chapter that assessed subjectivism’s overall prospects – actually attempting to weigh up the pros and cons – could have served a similar purpose. Of course, this would have made an already long book even longer. But, in exchange, Sobel might have omitted the essay on virtue ethics, which, although interesting, sheds little light on subjectivism.

The most significant new material in this volume is the essay 'Subjectivism and Reasons to be Moral'. It is chapter 1, and the only chapter appearing out of chronological order. Although, like the book's other chapters, this one addresses a particular problem for subjectivism, it does offer some deeper exposition of the subjectivist theory.

Subjectivism seems unable to vindicate the intuition that everyone necessarily has certain moral reasons. Sobel argues that subjectivism is consistent with people having that intuition. Note that this is different from arguing that subjectivism is consistent with the content of the intuition itself. Sobel's point is that existence of this common (or commonly held to be common) intuition is not surprising given the truth of subjectivism. Sobel unpacks the intuition and then considers why people might think they believe it. As he proceeds, the force of the objection abates.

For those of us who were already not so worried by this objection, the path is more rewarding than the destination. Sobel guides us to enrich our perspective on commonplace thoughts about how we have reasons to act morally. Eventually, the subjectivist's interpretation of such thoughts comes to seem like it was obvious, and even familiar, all along. It comes to seem that much of our everyday thought is not just consistent with subjectivism, but presupposing it. For instance, Sobel notes how thoughts about karma and the afterlife make the most sense against the backdrop of a subjectivist view of reasons.

The chapter closes with a few pages summarizing some general theoretical advantages of subjectivism that should be weighed against any counterintuitive results it entails in particular cases. Happily, this provides a bit more of the more comprehensive theoretical perspective I was suggesting would be desirable in a volume like this.

This book has a lot to offer a lot of philosophers. Since there is no single privileged dialectical path through this book, there is no strong reason to read it beginning to end. Other routes may suit some readers more. So, in closing, I offer a bit of guidance for readers.

For those with a standing interest in these debates, the obvious first stop is chapter 1, the new essay. It manifests Sobel's usual carefulness, fairness and thoroughness, addressing a central issue for subjectivism about reasons. After that, readers already acquainted with the battle lines will have little difficulty finding the chapters containing the branches of dialectic they wish to engage.

For readers who are newer to these debates – perhaps from some other region of metaethics or from some more distant philosophical landscape – another path may be most productive. After reading the introduction, it is worth skipping all the way to chapter 13, 'Subjectivism and Idealization'. There Sobel explains as thoroughly as anywhere in the book the guiding thought behind subjectivism. From there, it would probably be helpful to read chapter 7, 'Explanation, Internalism, and Reasons for Action', which further articulates the principal subjectivist insight by distinguishing it from the closely related and commonly scrutinized thesis of internalism about normative reasons as advanced by Williams. After that, it makes sense to read the new essay before pursuing any of the book's other specific topics.

That said, it is likely that any path through these essays, if followed with the kind of carefulness and diligence Sobel himself exhibits, will be rewarding and edifying.

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This review was written with support from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), under project number 652.001.003.