

Review of David Sobel, *From Valuing to Value: A Defense of Subjectivism*

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From Valuing to Value: A Defense of Subjectivism collects fifteen of David Sobel's papers on normative reasons, welfare, and ethics, many of which are contemporary classics. New here are a unifying introduction and the paper "Subjectivism and Reasons to be Moral." The volume would make a useful centerpiece to a graduate seminar focused on reasons, welfare, or consequentialism. And the new essay will be of great interest to anyone interested in normative reasons. A stalwart defender of subjectivism about normative reasons and welfare, Sobel is also a critic of those views, admitting he is "not at all confident that subjective accounts are correct" (8). Ethics and its neighboring fields would benefit if more practitioners shared Sobel's characteristic thoughtful humility, as well as the creativity, awareness of the history of philosophy, and attention to detail so often manifest in this excellent volume.

When read together, the essays in this collection embody a coherent and appealing philosophical outlook, which the publication of the collection provides a welcome opportunity to assess. I describe that outlook below, and then critically comment on the new essay, Sobel's master argument for subjectivism, and the relation between subjectivism and its rivals.

Three ideas predominate in this book. One is the titular subjectivism about normative reasons. No canonical theory is stated, but Sobel's sympathies are with the advice model, according to what one has reason to do depends on what one's idealized counterpart would desire that one do. Second is Sobel's subjectivism about welfare, which also appeals idealized desires or preferences, but restricts the set of desires that are relevant to welfare. Third is a

consequentialist moral theory that, unusually, rejects welfarism in favor of what Sobel calls the “autonomy principle” (77). This consequentialism demands not the promotion of each agent’s welfare, but rather the promotion of some thing or other on the behalf of each agent—where each may choose what morality will promote on their behalf. Throughout, Sobel’s methodology is to take “the messier path of weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of the view rather than find[ing] a single consideration that is so powerful that it will secure the truth of subjectivism regardless of its other costs” (7).

These three ideas interact. Sobel’s consequentialism is highly demanding: he rejects the demandingness objection to consequentialism (roughly) on the grounds that it illicitly appeals to a moralized distinction between doing and allowing. Some reassurance, however, comes from the fact that his subjectivism about normative reasons entails moral reasons are not always overriding. Though morality may require substantial sacrifice, we may sometimes have more reason to promote our own welfare (or our projects) than to do what morality demands.

A related feature of the view generates an objection to his theory of reasons. Sobel’s subjectivism rejects not only the overridingness of moral reasons, but also their universality: it entails (what many find implausible) that some agents may not have any reason at all to be moral. Sobel holds that this “amoralism objection” is the one “subjectivists should fear” (8).

The amoralism objection is the subject of Sobel’s new paper, “Subjectivism and Reasons to Be Moral,” and it is worth discussing and commenting upon it in depth. Sobel states the objection as follows:

It is quite broadly intuitive that all agents have significant reason to avoid [certain] seriously nasty actions [such as harming a child out of anger], and, since subjectivism

cannot vindicate this strong and widely shared intuition, this is a strong reason to reject subjectivism. (20)

This version does not assume any particular moral theory, avoids debates about the content of reasons to be moral, and neatly distinguishes the question of the universality of moral reasons from the question of their overridingness. While some subjectivists respond to this objection by arguing that, despite appearances, subjectivism is compatible with the universality of morality. Sobel argues it is not, tackling Michael Smith's argument in Essay 5, and Mark Schroeder's in Essay 15.

Sobel replies to this objection with a whirlwind presentation of fifteen arguments "debunking" the intuitions that drive it. The arguments fall roughly in two groups. One group purports to show that while subjectivism cannot vindicate the universality of morality, it can come close. Sobel argues subjectivism entails that almost all ordinary humans do have some non-negligible reason to be moral in the relevant cases, reasons that stem from altruistic desires or broadly instrumental considerations. Cases in which someone has absolutely no reason to be moral are "extremely rare" (23).

I found these arguments generally persuasive. Many versions of subjectivism do entail that most agents will have at least some normative reason to be moral, most of the time. The lesson, I take it, is that the success of the amoralism objection requires the idea that moral reasons are truly universal. Those willing to allow occasional exceptions should not doubt subjectivism on these grounds. This significantly attenuates the dialectical force of the objection.

A second group of arguments posit specific debunking explanations for the intuition that agents have reasons to be moral in the relevant cases. I can here summarize only a few. Perhaps

we tend to assume that “what goes around comes around” (either in life or in the afterlife) and so we assume being moral is in everyone’s self-interest (22-23, 25). Perhaps cases in which people have reasons to be moral are easier to recall than those in which people don’t, and so availability bias leads us to overgeneralize (27). Perhaps we confuse questions about normative reasons with the question of “whether it would be wrong for the agent to fail to X or that the agent has a moral reason to do X” (27) or the question of whether “it would be better if such awful actions were not done” (28). The intuitions underlying the amoralism objection would not be probative if they were due to such errors.

These arguments struck me as less successful. I continue to have the universality intuitions even when I try hard to avoid making the mistakes Sobel mentions. Sobel must thus insist that these are mistakes one cannot always consciously avoid making. That is plausible in some cases (such as availability bias), but not in others (tacitly assuming there is an afterlife). The argument concerning potential confusions about the relation between questions about normative reasons and other normative and evaluative concepts, associated with Bernard Williams and Kate Manne, strikes me as especially controversial. Many philosophers think that there are entailments between claims about normative reasons and other kinds of normative claims, such as claims about good and bad or right and wrong. These entailments are thought to be underwritten by conceptual truths, or are (at least) necessary truths of some kind. On such views, to see little light between claims about normative reasons and claims about value involves no confusion. Indeed, the opposite is true. Regardless of whether such views are plausible, they are not refuted by Sobel’s arguments.

The amoralism objection would be a bullet worth biting if strong considerations militated in subjectivism’s favor. A central contribution of this volume is to make clear Sobel’s master

argument for subjectivism, which concerns reasons of taste. Sobel argues that objectivist (“value-based”) theories of reasons have difficulty explaining the existence of reasons such as the reason one has to choose a flavor of ice cream one likes over the flavor one dislikes.

How does this argument work? Objectivists typically hold that pleasure is objectively valuable, and argue that reasons of taste are grounded in that value. Sobel’s objection turns on Sidgwickian ideas about pleasure (224). Either pleasure is a distinctive type of mental state, or pleasurable experiences are those that an agent prefers. The former idea implausibly assumes that all pleasures have something in common. But appeal to the latter view, Sobel argues, is off limits for objectivists. That view grounds facts about reasons in facts about pleasure, and facts about pleasure in facts about preferences. So some reasons depend on our preferences. Such a view, Sobel argues, does not insulate reasons from our “contingent concerns” in the way “strong objectivists” such as Scanlon and Parfit have sought to do. It is thus best understood as a kind of subjectivism, or, better, a kind of “weak objectivism” (219), which grounds some reasons in preferences and others in objective values.

While I am sympathetic to Sobel’s Sidgwickian ideas, I worry this argument cannot pull the weight Sobel assigns to it. To motivate subjectivism *per se*, Sobel must find flaw not only with strong objectivism, but also with weak objectivism. Yet the argument from reasons of taste has no force against weak objectivism. Since it is plausible that weak objectivism can avoid the amorality objection, as well, given Sobel’s presentation of the dialectic in this area, weak objectivism emerges as strictly more plausible than subjectivism. (It’s worth noting that weak objectivism has become prominent only in the years following the original publication of most of the essays in this volume. See, for example, the “hybrid” theories of Ruth Chang (2013) and Jeff

Behrends (2015), as well as some versions of the Reasoning View, such as those defended by Kieran Setiya (2014) and myself (2016).)

Sobel acknowledges the threat of weak objectivism, and (in a brief passage) suggests some further arguments against it. Weak objectivism is “less unified” than subjectivism, it “owes us an account of how to trade of the one sort of value for the other,” and it is typically “so under-specified so that assessing [it] is difficult” (36). Strikingly, he writes “it is not fair in this context to simply say that morality gives one significant reasons without taking a stand on the contours of the true morality” (36).

I suspect these arguments will move few weak objectivists. The Reasoning View holds that normative reasons are (the contents of) premise-attitudes in possible pieces of sound, undefeated practical reasoning (either enkratic or instrumental). It is thus approximately as unified as subjectivism. Since Sobel states the amoralism objection in terms of intuitive verdicts about paradigm cases, I’m not convinced weak objectivists are on the hook for providing a full moral theory. Why wouldn’t vindicating the paradigm intuitions be enough? And while one might object to objectivism on naturalistic grounds, Sobel wisely avoids this mistake. As he highlights, objectivism about normative reasons is compatible with many naturalist and non-naturalist metaethical theories (40). As someone sympathetic to weak objectivism, I came away from the volume eagerly anticipating further work by Sobel on this issue, from which I am sure I will learn a great deal.

Subtitle aside, a chief aim of Sobel’s book is to increase our knowledge of the details of the landscape in ethics. It achieves that laudable aim with great success. Reading (or re-reading) Sobel’s careful and compelling arguments will benefit anyone interested in normative reasons, welfare, or consequentialism.

References

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