

## **St. Petersburg covers, the agony argument, and *Notes from Underground***

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*Abstract.* Why does Derek Parfit, a philosopher very much associated with the University of Oxford, use pictures of St. Petersburg on the covers of volumes of *On What Matters*? Perhaps it is because he regards his agony argument as like something from Russian literature. But I can envisage a response to the argument from such literature.

*Draft version:* Version 2 (5<sup>th</sup> September 2022, “though it does...”).

*A warning to St. Petersburg*

*As the school bells ring,*

*There can't be this without the flurg*

*—Don't let the flurg take wing!*

Derek Parfit is a philosopher very much associated with the University of Oxford. Why then does he use pictures of St. Petersburg on the covers of volumes of *On What Matters*? Perhaps it is because he regards his agony argument as like something from Russian literature. It is an interesting topic, who can convincingly “get away” with a cover displaying a foreign university or environment. And where this book most belongs. Anyway, I can envisage a response to the argument from such literature.

Let us follow Parfit and call the following position “subjectivism about reasons,” though it does suppose that there are reasons: the position that a person only has reason to satisfy their

present desires. Now imagine someone who does not care about future agony. Parfit makes this argument (2011: 76):

- (1) This person has a reason to avoid future agony.
- (2) Subjectivism about reasons entails that they have no such reason.

Therefore:

- (3) Subjectivism about reasons is false.

Parfit responds to the objection that every actual person wants to avoid future agony with these words: “Of those who have believed that sinners would be punished with agony in Hell, many tried to stop sinning only when they became ill, and Hell seemed near.” (2011: 76)

Without looking too carefully into the matter, it does sound like an argument that is or might have been discussed in a Russian novel with the addition of this example. But there is a response suggested by such literature, specifically by the narrator of *Notes from Underground* in chapter 7: “If we assume that there are objective reasons to do certain things – they apply to us regardless of our desires – and that we know what these objective reasons are, it would be agony for us to follow these. We are by nature rebels. We want to break from the prescribed path and that is where our greatest satisfaction lies! Objectivism about reason scores no better with agony-avoidance.”

## References

Dostoevsky, F. (translated by R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky). 1993 (originally 1864). *Notes from Underground*. London: Vintage.

Parfit, D. 2011. *On What Matters, Volume 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Parfit, D. 2011. *On What Matters, Volume 2*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.