

Review: David Sobel, *From Valuing to Value*

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This is a penultimate version, which has not been corrected or typeset. There are some small differences between this and the final version.

This book is a substantial achievement: it contains the best of Sobel's penetrating discussions of a fascinating topic. I unhesitatingly recommend it to anyone interested in reasons, well-being, or rationality, and who is looking for more than mere slogans.

This is an edited collection with 15 chapters and a substantial introduction. The common theme in most is a defence of 'subjectivism' about reasons and values:

Subjectivism. 'Subjectivism about reasons for action is the thesis that only an agent's contingent concerns ultimately ground her practical reasons.' (219)

This is not a nihilistic thesis. According to subjectivism, there are practical reasons with normative force, and some things are valuable—albeit contingently so, depending on our valuing of them (hence the book's title). This may be contrasted with Jonas Olson's moral error theory, for example, according to which there are no irreducibly normative practical reasons, and the only true claims in the area are naturalistically-respectable ones about which acts would satisfy or promote the satisfaction of various desires. (Olson 2014, sec. 8.1)

Subjectivism must also be distinguished from Bernard Williams's Humeanism or 'internalism about reasons':

Internalism. 'A has a reason to phi only if he could reach the conclusion to phi by a sound deliberative route from the motivations he already has.' (Williams 1995, 35)

Where subjectivism says that an agent's desires (and other non-truth-assessable favouring attitudes) *explain* which she has the practical reasons that she does, or ground those reasons, internalism is a merely extensional claim: the presence of some reason implies the presence of some motivation and sound deliberative route. Sobel's formulation has more metaphysical bite. But since Williams's formulations in particular predate all or much of the recent turn in metaphysics towards questions of (necessary) co-extension versus ground, I think we should hesitate to attribute a view to Williams on the metaphysical distinction.

Rather than attempt to summarize each chapter, I will simply comment on two animating themes of the book: its sobriety, and the rejection of Williams-style internalism.

In Chapter 1 ('Subjectivism and Reasons to be Moral') Sobel defends subjectivism against the charge that it is counterintuitively amoral. Sobel tries to undermine the twin claims that lacking necessary reason to be decent *is* counter-intuitive, and that any such intuitions should be decisive. He argues that 'actual people of the sort we know would seem to have very serious subjectivist-based reasons to be decent to others', (10) and that our intuitions about non-actual people should be viewed with suspicion.

Sobel claims to be a 'sober subjectivist' (10). But his is a *methodological* sobriety: Sobel is admirably clear-eyed about the strengths and weaknesses of the view, and does not try to dismiss the latter. But his view is not sober in the sense of being restrained in its philosophical content—philosophically, his approach here might fairly be described as bullet-biting. What I call Sobel's 'austere' subjectivism as such does not shy away from the conclusion that we do not necessarily have reason to act morally.

Other broadly subjectivist writers have by contrast gone for 'moderate' views which putatively avoid this implication, for example via the weighing of different desires against each other. In this volume, Chapter 15 ('Subjectivism and Proportionalism') criticizes Mark Schroeder's moderate subjectivism.

Now I do think Sobel's defence of austere internalism in Chapter 1 is largely successful, at least for those of us lucky enough to live where and when decency generally pays. But I am more sceptical of its dialectical force against the objectivist/externalist: the intuition that we *necessarily* have reasons to treat others well will be hard to shift.

Besides its metaphysical content, subjectivism differs from internalism in a substantive way. In Chapter 7 in particular, Sobel argues for an 'ideal advisor' subjectivism over (Williams's) internalism. Following two insightful discussions—of Williams's rather opaque 'explanatory' argument for internalism, (Williams 1981) and of the justification for correcting factual errors on the part of the agent—Sobel argues that internalism is inferior to subjectivism.

Crucial to Williams's view is the notion of 'sound deliberation'. Sobel construes Williams as advancing what I'll call an *ideal self* view: one has reason to ϕ only if after ideally sound deliberation starting from one's actual motivations, one would be motivated to ϕ . But Sobel instead defends an *ideal advisor* account: one has reason to ϕ only if after ideally sound deliberation starting from one's actual motivations, one would advise one's actual self to ϕ .

The difference between the two is brought out with *fragile reasons*: 'One's reason to ϕ is fragile if the process of becoming ideally informed results in the ideally informed agent lacking reason to ϕ [...] the process of becoming an ideally sound deliberator destroys [such reasons].' (155) In what follows I will assume that there really are fragile reasons.

It is clear how fragile reasons can be better accounted for on an ideal advisor account, than on an ideal self account. The clearest examples concern reasons to gain information. Suppose that I wish to get the next train to London, but I don't know which platform it leaves from. It seems undeniable that I have reason to look at the departures board to find out. And an ideal advisor account can explain this: my advisor knows where the train leaves from, and also knows that looking at the board is the best way for *me* to find out. So, he would advise me to look at the board, and so I have reason to look at the board.

But my ideal self already knows where the train departs from, and so would not check the board. As such, according to the ideal self view I do not have reason to look at the departures board. This case against ideal self views seems watertight.

The case can be pushed further: the verdict seems not only counterintuitive, but also in tension with fundamental tenets of instrumental rationality. I have reason to go to London by train, and looking at the departures board is a necessary means to doing so, but I have no reason to look at the board.

But even if ideal self views are to be rejected, must internalism be construed in such terms? Sobel writes that 'the deliberation that Williams claims can close the gap between our current motivations and our genuine reasons is deliberation that, in many cases, we are unable to carry out'. (156-7) Williams is often cryptic, but it is not obvious to me that he should be understood as defending an ideal self view.

Williams is not very forthcoming on what is required for sound deliberation. But much of what he says seems to support something less than *ideal*. Talk of *a* sound deliberative route seems to imply that there are often many such sound routes; there are less often many *ideally* sound routes.

And Williams refers to 'correcting any errors of fact and reasoning involved in the agent's view of the matter' (Williams 1995, 36) and in other cases he refers to apparent reasons evaporating if they are 'dependent on false belief' (Williams 1981, 103). The main point is that there is some distance between correcting false beliefs and providing the agent with all true beliefs, and the further we go in this direction of weakening the ideality of the ideal self, the less fragile reasons appear to be genuine reasons. If an apparent reason evaporates when a relevant and important false belief (such as that what I am about to drink is gin) is corrected, then the intuition that is a genuine reason is much weaker than if it would only evaporate were I to become completely informed about all potentially relevant matters of fact.

So whether or not a sub-ideal view was held by the actual Williams, I think it can escape some of Sobel's criticisms of internalism. Sobel does discuss this possibility (123–4), and I think the most promising version of internalism is likely to be sub-ideal in this sense.

This book repays careful study. Indeed, Sobel's praise of Michael Smith—in a paper co-authored with David Copp—could equally be applied to this volume: 'Smith ... laudably attempts to get beyond metaphors to a more precise presentation of the root thought.' (161) But the intellectual rigour and honesty perhaps also *demand* careful study—someone who 'dips into' a chapter or two is liable to be confused. For example, someone not familiar with the dialectic is likely to be puzzled why Chapter 7 opens with a criticism of Williams's internalism about reasons (which is at least superficially similar to subjectivism).

Aside from Chapter 1 and some revisions, most of the chapters in this book have been published in relatively accessible venues—journals rather than obscure edited collections—and so students may be advised to wait for the forthcoming paperback version. That caveat aside, I strongly recommend this outstanding book to anyone with an interest in these topics.¹

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