

Book discussion

Parfit's challenges¹

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*In his long-awaited book *On What Matters* Parfit develops a normative theory that covers a whole range of normative concepts, from reasons and rationality to questions of moral progress and meaning of life. This paper focuses on Parfit's view on reasons and rationality, and especially concentrates on three theses that are implicitly or explicitly endorsed by Parfit. The theses are: 1) the concept of a normative reason cannot be explicated in a non-circular way, 2) rationality of non-normative beliefs never influences the rationality of desires and actions, and 3) there are no desire-based reasons. The main aim of the paper is to critically evaluate the plausibility of the latter three theses.*

Key words: reasons, rationality, desire and object-based theories

1 Introduction

Derek Parfit's long-awaited book has finally been published, after more than a decade of its draft circulating on the Internet. *On What Matters* consists of two massive, largely self-contained volumes, whose topics range from discussions on reasons, rationality, ethics, metaethics, all the way to ontological questions like 'Why does the Universe exist?' Because of the enormous range of topics and massiveness of the work it is hard to pin down the principle that unifies all topics under one title. Mark Schroeder, in his review of *On What Matters*,² says that the plausible unifying characteristic of the two volumes is the development of an argu-

¹ D. Parfit, *On What Matters*, Vol. 1 and 2 (Oxford: OUP, 2011)

² See <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/25393-on-what-matters-volumes-1-and-/>

ment for the possibility of moral progress. I concur with this opinion, which is strongly supported by Parfit's amazing development of *The Triple Theory* (second volume, chapter 23) through which he argues that "optimific principles (...) are the only principles whose universal acceptance everyone could rationally choose and (...) no one could reasonably reject." (Parfit 2011, vol. 2, 245)³ That is, he argues that Kantian deontology, Scanlon's contractualism, and rule utilitarianism (when plausibly refined) all converge to the same moral conclusion. All aspects of Parfit's two volumes have already been discussed in published work⁴ and in the present discussion I will focus on first five chapters of the volume 1 in which Parfit discusses the topic of reasons and rationality.

Traditionally, normative concepts are divided into three main groups: Reason, rationality and reasons (Korsgaard 2008, Raz 1999). Reason (with a capital R) is usually thought of as a general faculty for performing different kinds of inferences. Rationality is conceived as a quality of the mind or the person who conforms to some set of principles or rules, which may include rules of logical inference, epistemic norms and norms of practical reasoning. Finally, reasons are conceived as substantive considerations that count in favor of having certain beliefs, desires or performing some actions (Korsgaard 2008, 2, see Scanlon

1998). In the first five chapters of his book *On What Matters* Parfit develops his theory about reasons and rationality. His main distinction is between subjective or desire-based theories and objective or value-based theories. According to Parfit all desire-based theories are false; there are no desire (state) based reasons, but rather the only kind of reasons that exist are object-given reasons.

In this paper I will present Parfit's theory of reasons and rationality (with the emphasis on practical reason and practical rationality) and try to answer Parfit's challenges to desire-based theories and indicate some problems in Parfit's conception of reasons and rationality. More precise, I will argue against three theses: 1) the concept *reason* cannot be explicated in a non-circular way, 2) rationality of non-normative beliefs never influences rationality of desires and actions, and 3) there are no desire-based reasons.

2 *Basic normative concepts*

Relation between the three main normative concepts is not uncontroversial, but generally it can be described as Reason being the mental faculty (or set of underlying cognitive abilities) that responds to reasons according to principles of rationality. However, there are at least three views that can be distinguished here. On the first view there is only limited connection between these three notions. Reasons are

³ Further references to Parfit (2011) will omit volume designation, and will refer to volume 1.

⁴ See for example J. Suikkanen and J. Cottingham (eds.), *Essays on Derek Parfit's*

On What Matters, Series: Ratio Book Series, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009.

taken to be explanations of normative facts that count in favor of having certain attitudes (beliefs, desires and intentions), and rationality is completely dissociated from reasons and is constituted by principles or norms for consistent regulation of mental attitudes (e.g. Broome 1999, 2004). Therefore, according to this view, a person can be rational in her reasoning capacities without actually having any reason to believe or intend the conclusion of her inference.

Other two views treat these three notions in a more homogenous way. According to one view, the concept of a reason is the primary notion through which the other two normative notions get explained (see Scanlon 1998, chapter 1). In that manner the faculty of Reason can be explained as a faculty that enables one to appropriately respond to reasons – i.e. to substantive considerations that count in favor of something

– and rational principles can be conceived as requirements “that direct us to act according to those considerations, telling us what to count in favor of what.” (Korsgaard 2008, 3) On this view Reason is construed as passive, being more akin to perception than to some more active faculty; Reason in some sense *perceives* reasons that are there. On the other hand reasons are being divorced from reasoning processes and are being attached to objects and facts outside the reasoning subject.

The third view reverses the order of explanation and reestablishes the connection between the reasoning agent and the reasons. According to this view Reason and rational principles are taken to be more basic in accounting for the normativity of reasons. This way of explaining can be described as Reason being the capacity for reasoning or making inferences according to some principles of correct reasoning and in that process reasons can be conceived as being functions of appropriate reasoning patterns which derive their normative force from principles that govern rational reasoning processes (e.g. see Korsgaard 1996, 2008, Smith 1994, Williams 1981, 1995).

3 *Outline of Parfit’s theory of reasons and rationality*

Parfit’s view of reasons and rationality belongs to the second group of views depicted above. He follows Scanlon (1998) in claiming that the concept of a reason is our most fundamental normative concept. It is fundamental in two senses: it is undefinable, conceptually primitive notion and it serves as a tool with which other normative concepts can be explained. For the undefinability thesis Parfit (following Scanlon [1998]) says that the closest to the explication of the meaning of ‘reason’ is to say that “[f]acts give us reasons (...) when they count in favor of our having some attitude, or our acting in some way.” But then, the problem with this explication is that when we want to know how something *counts in favor of* something, we get back to the idea that it can only mean “roughly ‘a reason for’.”⁵ (Parfit 2011, 31, see also Scanlon

⁵ This statement is puzzling, compare: knife is a hand instrument whose function is to cut things. – Cut things how? – By being a knife.

1998, 17) Parfit says that such concepts need to be explained in a different way, “by getting people to think thoughts that use these concepts.” (Ibid.)

Reasons are given by facts that count in favor of having some belief or performing some action and these normative reason-giving facts cannot be reduced to any other kind of fact. Reasons can be in conflict and they can differ in their force, strength or weight:

If I enjoy walnuts, this fact gives me a reason to eat them; but, if they would kill me, this fact gives me a stronger or weightier conflicting reason *not* to eat them. (Parfit 2011, 32)

On the other hand reasons, since they are conceptually basic, can serve as explanations of other normative concepts. For example, Parfit suggests that we can use concepts *should* and *ought* in *decisive-reason-implying* sense and explain them as saying that what we ought to do is what we have the ‘most’ or ‘decisive’ reason to do (ibid. 33). Reasons also explain the rationality of action: what is rational to do is what we would have a sufficient reason to do if our beliefs about relevant facts were true.

Rationality is explicated in terms of reasons: rationality is *responsiveness* to reasons, and irrationality is failing to respond to decisive reasons (ibid. 34, 111). Also the concept *rational* is used as an attribute that one can ascribe to other people’s attitudes or acts. In that sense rationality is used as an expression of approval or disapproval, in the sense of offering a praise or criticism of someone’s actions or attitudes (ibid. 33, 123).

This characterization also explains why reasons depend on facts, but rationality depends on person’s beliefs (ibid. 111–112). Parfit gives an example (34): when facing a poisonous snake we might believe that if we start to run we would get away from the snake and survive. However, actually the opposite is true; in order to survive we should stand still. In this case Parfit says that if we start to run we would be acting rationally because we are acting in accordance with our belief about what to do. However, according to Parfit we would not be acting in accordance with reason, since reason-giving fact in this case implies that we should stay still. However, if we do run away in the mentioned situation we would be acting in accordance with a *merely apparent* reason, which would be a real reason if our belief about running were true (ibid. 35).

At this point I want to address Parfit’s thesis that the concept *reason* cannot be explicated in a non-circular way. If we glance through the literature on normativity one immediately finds out that the primitiveness of reason thesis is not as evident as Parfit and others might make it seem to be. Some authors⁶ think that the concept of reason can be explained by taking some other normative notions to be primitive. For example “reason” can be taken to be an explanation of a normative fact,

⁶ For example see Broome (2004) and Torbjörn (2010).

that is, a fact of the following form; P ought to Φ (Broome 2004).⁷ So on this account when we say ‘John has a reason to Φ ’ we mean that John ought to Φ and that there is an explanation why he ought to Φ .⁸ Here the concept *reason* is reduced and explained by using concepts *ought* and *explanation*. This explanation may have its problems but on the face of it, it does not seem to be circular and that is why it is not clear why Parfit does not take it into consideration. In the light of the latter account Parfit’s undefinability of *reason* thesis seems to be an unjustified proclamation.

3.1 *Beliefs and rationality of desires and actions*

According to Parfit, even though rationality of our desires and actions depends on our beliefs, they do not depend on our beliefs being rational or true. He gives an example of a person who thinks that by smoking she will effectively protect her health, and because of that desires to smoke (Parfit 2011, 113–115). The person holds that belief because her neighbor smoked a lot, and lived a very long life. This desire would not be irrational because if the belief were true then she would have a reason to desire to smoke. In this case Parfit says that the person is not responding to epistemic reasons and that it might be said that she is *epistemically* irrational, but it cannot be said that she is *practically* irrational. According to Parfit “it is not worth claiming that some belief’s irrationality is also inherited by any desire or act that depends on this belief.” (Ibid, 116–117)

However, Parfit allows that rationality of desires and actions can depend on the rationality of *normative* beliefs. Normative beliefs are beliefs about reasons. According to Parfit when we have some desire for which we believe that we have no reason to have, then our having this desire might be irrational. Also, when we have false and irrational beliefs about practical reasons for having some desire or performing some action then this desire and action are not rational, even if they would be rational if the normative beliefs were true (ibid, 119). However, I believe that Parfit is wrong; irrationality of non-normative beliefs can also affect practical rationality.⁹

⁷ ‘ P ’ stands for an agent and ‘to Φ ’ for an infinitival phrase that can refer to acting, intending, believing, etc.

⁸ Here the explanation can take different forms. For example Torbjörn (2010) argues that a proper explanation will have a form of a deductive argument that is analogous to the covering law explanation from the philosophy of science, with the difference that the major premise will contain some general normative principle instead of the law of nature.

⁹ It is not all that obvious that one can draw a distinction between normative and non-normative beliefs along the lines that Parfit suggests, because normally, conscious beliefs, such as the belief that smoking is healthy will include conscious access to its ground (like the belief that a neighbor who smoked lived very long), and so when considering on what does the desire depend, it is not clear that we could often or ever distinguish desire’s sole dependency on non-normative belief, as opposed to

According to Parfit if we reason in the following way we are practically rational: I want to be healthy; if I smoke I will maintain my health; therefore, I am inclined or I want to smoke. We are practically rational because if the belief were true we would have a sufficient reason to smoke and that is why the rationality of the desire does not depend on the rationality of belief. However, this idea cannot be completely true. First problem that comes to mind is that, when the belief is irrational in the sense that it cannot be true, then it seems that the rationality of the desire will depend on the rationality of the belief because there will be no sense in which, if the belief were true, it would give us sufficient reason to desire something. For example, let us suppose that I have a desire to make some significant intellectual accomplishment, and that I believe that by proving the completeness of Peano's axioms I would fulfill my desire; and therefore, I form an inclination or a desire to prove the completeness of arithmetic. Of course, I finished a course in symbolic logic and I am familiar with Gödel's incompleteness theorems, however they do not affect my present instrumental belief. So, I have an irrational desire to do the impossible (not under that description) because I have an irrational belief that I can do what is impossible (not under that description). In this case, to say that my desire is not irrational because were the belief true I would have a sufficient reason to have the desire would make no sense, because this belief cannot be true.

Furthermore, truthfulness of a relevant belief is not always sufficient to ground the rationality of a desire or an act. For example, I desire to buy a beach house in Dubrovnik because I believe that soon I will get 3 million euros, and I base this belief on the conviction that I will win a lottery jackpot (without buying a lottery ticket) because star constellation is arranged so and so. Being impatient, this desire leads me to get a credit and buy a house in Dubrovnik. Additionally, let us suppose that I will in fact soon get 3 million euros because, without my knowing it, my rich aunt died and left me 3 million euros. This act, from a third party perspective, looks completely irrational. My act is irrational because it is based on an irrational belief, and the fact that my belief that I will get 3 million euros happens to be true does not give me sufficient reason to buy the house.

I think that these examples, if plausible, show that Parfit's idea that the rationality of desires and actions is explained by dependence on beliefs (about relevant features of events that are desired) which if true provide reasons for having some desires and performing some actions is not generally true. Also the relation between the rationality of desires, actions and beliefs does not obtain in the way that Parfit envisages it; irrationality of non-normative beliefs can affect the rationality of desires and actions.

the latter and it's consciously accessible ground (normative belief). Because of the space limitation I will not take into account this possible line of argument, and in the main text I will simply take for granted Parfit's distinction between normative and non-normative beliefs.

4 *Object-based and subject-based theories of reasons for action*

Parfit distinguishes two kinds of theories of practical reasons: object-based and subject-based theories. According to object-based theories

there are certain facts that give us reasons both to have certain desires and aims, and to do whatever might achieve these aims. These reasons are given by facts about the *objects* of these desires or aims, or what we might want or try to achieve. (Parfit 2011, 45)

This group of theories Parfit also calls value-based theories because:

[o]bject-given reasons are provided by facts that make certain outcomes worth producing or preventing, or make certain things worth doing for their own sake. In most cases, these reason-giving facts also make these out-comes or acts good or bad for particular people, or impersonally good or bad. (Ibid.)

In this respect Parfit follows Scanlon (1998) in the claim that the facts that give us reasons to perform some action are the same facts that make certain outcomes or objects good or valuable. Value is explained in terms of reasons, where valuable things and outcomes are based on facts that are also reason-giving facts that count in favor of bringing about those valuable outcomes.

Subject-based theories claim that our practical reasons depend upon some facts about rational individuals, such as “facts about what would fulfill or achieve our present desires or aims (...) had [we] carefully considered all of the relevant facts.” (Ibid.) I would also call them state-based theories, because often the emphasis is put on our desires as states that we have when figuring out what our reasons are, rather than checking specifically what are the contents of these desires that could be reason giving.¹⁰

Parfit distinguishes between many versions of desire-based theories of practical reasons, but here I will mention only one version that has the most adherents. According to this theory reasons are those desires (construed broadly as motivational states) that we would have after performing and engaging in the process of rational deliberation (e.g. see Williams 1981, 1995, Smith 1994, 2004). Rational deliberation is conceived as reasoning about our desires in accordance with principles of rationality; what these principles are is still a matter of controversy

¹⁰ Parfit himself distinguishes between object-given and state-given reasons. However, for him state-given reasons are “provided by certain facts (...) about our state of having this desire. We would have such reasons when our having some desire would be in some way good, either as an end or as a means.” Where this means that the state in question would be worth having because it is good in itself (like wanting someone to be well and healthy) or may be good in a more pragmatic way (like believing that God exists for pragmatic reasons) (Parfit 2011, 50–51). While in the sense that I am using the term ‘state-given reasons’ one can have a reason to believe some proposition because one has some other belief or one can have a reason to realize a content of her desire because one has that desire.

(see Smith 2009). Usually, as a minimal condition everyone would accept that rational deliberation is governed by the means-end principle, and certain epistemic principles that enable one to attain information that is relevant for decision making.

According to Parfit when desire-based theorists “appeal to the desires that we would have after fully informed and *rational* deliberation, they are referring only to *procedural* rationality.” This kind of characterization of rationality will be Parfit’s main ground for criticizing desire-based theories, because on the procedural conception of rationality one is not “rationally required to have any particular telic desires, or aims.” (cited in Smith 2009, 118). On the other hand value-based theories presuppose a substantive conception of rationality where there are some desires or aims that are rationally required, because there are reason-giving facts that count in favor of them and rationality consists in responding to these facts.

4.1 *The agony argument*

According to Parfit we should reject all desire-based theories and accept some version of value-based theory of practical reasons. His basic argument is that subject-based theories cannot capture the intuition that we always have a reason to want to avoid being in agony. His argument can be presented in the following way (see Parfit 2011, 73–76):

P1: We all have a reason to want to avoid and to try to avoid, all future agony.

P2: According to subject-based theories; because rationality is procedural, after ideal rational deliberation I could still end up with the desire not to avoid all future agony, or at least with a lack of desire to avoid all future agony, and thereby imply that I do not have reason to avoid all future agony.

Therefore,

C: Subject-based theories are false.

This argument clearly draws its plausibility (if it has any) from our inability to imagine a person who would want to be in agony without having any explanation why they would want that. Partly, what explains this intuition must be the fact that nobody actually (who has experienced great pain) wants to be in agony.¹¹ And maybe this is true for all possible sentient beings, that in normal circumstances they would want to avoid all present or future agony. However, this is something that the desire-based theorist can easily accommodate. Moreover, it is strange that this argument is directed against desire-based theories because it is plausible to suppose that being in agony or just a thought of the possibility of experiencing agony is a disposition to avoid or to

¹¹ Except if she is a masochist, but then we would have an explanation and maybe no reason not to be in agony. However, in the case of the masochist, we probably would not call it agony.

want to avoid situations which could lead to being in the state of agony. So, the explanation why it seems to be a necessary fact that there is always a reason to want to avoid all future agony is the fact about what it means to be in agony, and that is simply the fact that being in agony conceptually implies having a disposition (perhaps defeasible) to avoid or want to avoid being in that state.

On the other hand, if we allow the possibility that the ideally rational deliberator could conclude that there is reason for being in agony or that she lacks a desire to avoid all future agony we would lose the possibility of explaining the intuition that we always have a reason to avoid all future agony. Indeed, what could be our reason to want to avoid all future agony if our ideally rational counterpart concludes that she has no reason to avoid all future agony? So if we grant that **P2** is sound then we can simply deny **P1** and say that the rational deliberator trumps Parfit's intuitions about reasons.

Another problem with Parfit's agony argument is that it misconstrues the difference between what he calls desire-based and value-based theories of practical reasons.

According to Parfit, desire-based theorist cannot accommodate **P1** because she would need to invoke object-given reasons (facts about feeling pain in this case) that are unavailable to the subjectivist, because, supposedly subjectivist denies their existence. However, as Smith (2009,

135, ft. 15) emphasizes it is not the case that desire-based theorist does not recognize the existence of object-given reasons for wanting certain things; the difference between her and a value-based theorist consists in explaining the normativity of this fact. Desire-based theorist tries to explain this fact by "a more basic fact about the rational constraints on our desires" (ibid.), while Parfit treats substantive claims such as **P1** as fundamental and inexplicable truth. So, in this case the difference between desire-based theorist and Parfit is in the direction of explanation of the existence of our reasons; desire-based theorist explains reasons in terms of rational principles that govern our motivational states, while Parfit takes intuitions about reasons for granted without explaining their source of normativity.¹²

According to Smith (2009) when Parfit says that there is a fact that we always have a reason to want to avoid future agony he commits himself to the idea that it must be possible for one to reason herself in desiring this outcome, which (since it is a necessary truth) commits him to the existence of the principle for the rational formation of desires that can be formulated as saying something like if you believe that there is a future prospect of being in agony then you will desire not to be in that state of agony. If we look things from this perspective then Parfit's general view is not that different from desire-based

¹² This remark also shows that Parfit's contention that desire-based theories presuppose minimal, procedural view of rationality is unwarranted. For desire-based theorist what there is a reason to want or do will depend on which norms of rationality there are (see Korsgaard 1986, Smith 2009).

theorist's ideas. This principle, if plausible will play a governing role in rational deliberation; the only thing that is left to explain is the status of this principle; whether it can be reduced to some other principles, whether it is fundamental or whether it should be rejected.

4.2 *The incoherence argument*

Parfit has one more separate argument¹³ against desire-based theories, which he calls *the incoherence argument* (see Parfit 2011, 91–95). The argument is that the desire-based theorist holds two inconsistent claims. First desire-based theorist wants to say that we have a reason to do what we would want ourselves to do if we were completely rational and had the relevant true beliefs about the objects of our telic (underived) desires. However, desire-based theorist claims that there is no object- given reason, that is, reasons that are given by the *intrinsic* features of the objects of our desires. Hence, desire-based theorist has no reason to have desires that she would have if she were completely rational.

This argument might be read as claiming that since telic desires are held for no reason then no other derived desire is reasonable because the chain of reasons is ungrounded. However, in this case a desire- based theorist has a ready answer; telic desires (whatever they are) are at least defeasible grounds for having other derived desires. Or it might be taken to claim that from the perspective of a rational deliberator there has to be some intrinsic features of objects which are grounds for or because of which she has those telic desires. However, what will count as a reason for a perfectly rational deliberator is determined by norms of rationality and the circumstances in which she finds herself.¹⁴

From the perspective of the average agent the statement that there is a reason for her to want something can be analyzed as saying that if I deliberated rationally I would want that thing (see Williams 1981); where the relevant normative belief would not be about the intrinsic features of the desired object, but would be about response-dependent facts that include my completely rational counterpart and his response to my circumstances. So there does not seem to be anything incoherent in desire-based accounts of reasons.

4.3 *Problems with the object-based or value-based theories*

Object or value-based theories in general have a serious deficit. Since they exclusively postulate reasons as bases that, so to say, from the outside of the reasoning agent ground agent's desires, beliefs, needs,

¹³ I will not discuss the *all or nothing argument* since it is an extension of the *agony argument*.

¹⁴ And so the dispute may go into the direction whether rationality is substantive or procedural, however, as I said earlier, desire-based theorist is not committed to the view that rationality is procedural. (see ft. 10).

actions, principles, rationality, etc., they have a problem in accounting for the basic normative question, and that is what is my reason as a practically rational agent to accept the means-end principle of practical rationality? This principle is constitutive of agency; one who does not at least reason in accordance with the means-end principle is not an agent at all (see Korsgaard 2008, part 1, cf. Railton 1997).

However, on Parfit's account, if there is a reason for one to accommodate his action in order to attain some end, then there will be some mind-independent fact that constitutes a reason for doing that. Now if we ask why should I care about this further fact we cannot appeal to the means-end principle itself since that is the principle that we are trying to ground and its ground is, according to Parfit, supposed to be explained in terms of reasons that are object-given. However, the question was precisely why we should care about those reasons, i.e. why should we be motivated by them. For desire-based theories the answer to this question is straightforward: means-end principle is constitutive of practical rationality, so if anyone wants to act in some way there is a standing (default) state-based reason to endorse the means for accomplishing the end.

5 Conclusion

In this paper my aim was to outline Parfit's theory of reasons and rationality, to place it in a more general framework of the debate on normative reasons and to evaluate its consequences. I formulated three theses that can be discerned in the first five chapters of Parfit's new book.

The first thesis was that the concept of a reason is primitive and that it cannot be understood in any other terms. The second thesis says that the rationality of non-normative beliefs does not influence the rationality of desires and actions. According to the third thesis all desire-based theories of practical reasons are false. In the discussion I argued that there are reasons to doubt soundness of the three theses.

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