

### 3

## Parfit's Case against Subjectivism<sup>1</sup>

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Derek Parfit, in *On What Matters*, argues that all subjective accounts of normative reasons for action are false.<sup>2</sup> Parfit has three arguments to this conclusion.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter I will focus on his “Agony Argument.” I take this to be his favorite argument against subjectivism as only this argument is called “decisive.”<sup>4</sup> The first premise of the Agony Argument is that we have current reasons to avoid future agony. Its second premise is that subjective accounts cannot vindicate this fact. So, the argument concludes, subjective accounts must be rejected. I will accept the first premise of this argument and that it is valid. The main thesis of this chapter is that subjectivists can account for our reasons to get pleasure and avoid agony. I conclude that the Agony Argument does not justify the rejection of subjective accounts. I will also examine Parfit's understanding of the distinction between objective and subjective theories. I claim Parfit offers a surprisingly

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<sup>2</sup> Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, forthcoming from Oxford University Press, p. 82. All otherwise unattributed citations refer to the draft of this book from November, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> The three arguments are labeled the “Agony Argument,” the “All or Nothing Argument,” and the “Incoherence Argument.” Elsewhere I have responded to a version of the Incoherence Argument which, Parfit tells us, presses concerns similar to those that David Enoch argues for in “Why Idealize?,” *Ethics* 115 (July 2005): 759–87. I respond to Enoch's version of the worry in my “Subjectivism and Idealization,” *Ethics* 119 (January 2009): 336–52. I believe that my reply to Enoch also successfully replies to Parfit's version of the worry.

<sup>4</sup> *On What Matters*, p. 82.

narrow understanding of subjectivism such that even if his critique were successful, this would be bad news for fewer theories than we might have thought. Finally, I reply to some possible worries about my arguments.

Parfit asks “Who could possibly deny that the nature of agony gives us reasons to want to avoid being in agony, and that the nature of happiness gives us reasons to want to be happy?” He claims that the Agony Argument shows that “such claims *must* be denied by those who accept subjective theories about reasons.” [66] The Agony Argument maintains that we have reasons to want to get future feelings that we will like and to avoid future agony even when we have no current desires which would be served by doing so. Subjectivism is alleged to be incompatible with this and so must be rejected.

Call the Traditional Extensional Argument against subjectivism the claim that we have reasons to be moral even when we lack any concerns to do so. Mark Schroeder helpfully labels objections of this type the “Too Few Reasons Objection”. The objection is that subjective accounts cannot vindicate all the reasons we are confident there are.<sup>5</sup> An advantage of the Agony Argument over the Traditional Extensional Argument is that it is more obvious and more universally accepted that we have reasons to avoid future agony than it is that we have reasons to be moral. Many subjectivists have been willing to accept that agents only contingently have reason to act in accord with morality’s requirements. It would be harder to claim that future agony only contingently provides reasons to avoid it.

Ordinarily at this point in the chapter I would offer a brief account of what makes a theory count as subjectivist. I usually say that a theory of reasons for action is subjectivist to the extent that it claims that an agent’s reasons are determined by contingent concerns or favorings that the agent would have under some procedurally specified circumstances. However, such a characterization will turn out to be part of what is at issue in what follows.

Parfit sometimes suggests that the subjectivist theories of some prominent philosophers, including Bernard Williams, Richard Brandt, and John Rawls, are best understood as disguised tautologies or definitional truths rather than as substantive theses about what we have normative reason to do or what is good for us.<sup>6</sup> I will here always understand subjectivism to be offering a substantive account of normative reasons.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Schroeder argues that subjectivists have real hope of vindicating the claim that all agents have strong reasons to be moral in his *Slaves of the Passions*, Oxford University Press, 2007. I find grounds for resisting this claim in my 2009 review of this book in the *Notre Dame Philosophical Review* <<http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=15905>>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, sections 83–4 (“Analytical Subjectivism about Reasons” and “The Unimportance of Internal Reasons”), in *On What Matters*.

Parfit has a variety of arguments against naturalistic accounts of what it is to be a reason. He argues that such accounts must fail and that what it is to be a reason is an irreducibly normative non-natural property. However, what makes it the case that something is a reason or what provides a reason, he insists, can be a natural property. I am here hoping to isolate Parfit's worries specifically against subjective accounts understood as accounts of what provides reasons. He claims the Agony Argument refutes subjectivism so understood.<sup>7</sup> This is the claim I address here.

To evaluate the Agony Argument we need to understand what Parfit means by agony and pleasure. Parfit accepts that current phenomenological states only count as agony or pleasure if they are liked or disliked. And this liking or disliking itself is not a reaction we have any reason to have. We simply have such reactions to some phenomenology and not to others. That is, he rejects Benthamite Hedonism which claims that the intrinsic nature of some phenomenology, regardless of our response to it, provides reasons. But given that we like or dislike certain phenomenology, he claims that we have reasons to get what we like and to avoid what we dislike.

But subjective accounts cannot vindicate this truth, Parfit claims, for two key reasons which will concern us at length below. First, he claims, likings are importantly different from desires and so subjectivists cannot appeal to the reason-givingness of likings. Second, subjective accounts can only grant reason-giving authority to desires I currently have or would currently have after informed deliberation. But a person might lack any current desire, even after informed deliberation, which would give weight to future likings or desires. And so subjective accounts cannot capture the thought that one's future agony necessarily provides one with reasons now to take steps to avoid it. Parfit stresses the second of these two arguments.

One might resist Parfit's Agony Argument either by denying that likings provide reasons or by claiming that subjectivists can vindicate such reasons. I will adopt the latter strategy. When we understand pleasure and agony as Parfit does, such that they are constituted by favorable and unfavorable responses in cases where the agent is accurately informed about the object of her response, I agree with him that such states provide reasons. But I will claim that Parfit has not given us sufficient reason to doubt that subjectivists can accommodate this fact.

<sup>7</sup> See chapters 24 and 25 of *On What Matters*.

DESIRES AND LIKINGS

Parfit claims that likings are importantly different from desires and that subjectivists cannot grant that likings provide reasons.<sup>8</sup> While he acknowledges that likings are in some ways “desire-like” [63], he argues that there are key differences between the two states and that it is a mistake to think of liking as a kind of desiring. Parfit relies on the claim that not only are likings different from desires but also that subjectivists cannot grant authority to likings. Indeed the former claim is useful for the Agony Argument only if it helps establish the latter claim.<sup>9</sup>

Parfit tells us he will understand the category of desire as broader than it typically is understood in English. Parfit writes “The word ‘desire’ often refers to our sensual desires or appetites, or to our being attracted to something, by finding the thought of it appealing. I shall use ‘desire’ in a wider sense, which refers to any state of being motivated, or of wanting something to happen and being to some degree disposed to make it happen, if we can.” [56] Parfit contrasts desires in this sense with

hedonic likings or disliking of certain actual present sensations that make our having these sensations pleasant, painful or in other ways unpleasant. . . . It is sometimes

<sup>8</sup> T.M. Scanlon also tried to show that desires never or almost never provide reasons. See his *What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 43. See also his “Replies,” *Social Theory and Practice*, April 2002. In the section of that article entitled “Reasons,” Scanlon replies to worries David Copp and I offered against the strong claim that desires almost never provide reasons in our “Desires, Motives, and Reasons: Scanlon’s Rationalistic Moral Psychology,” *Social Theory and Practice* 28(2) (April 2002): 243–76. I discuss at more length his attempt to accommodate our reasons of mere taste without deferring to desires in my “Pain for Objectivists: The Case of Matters of Mere Taste,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 8(4) (August 2005): 437–57. See also Ruth Chang, “Can Desires Provide Reasons for Action?” in *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, eds. R. Jay Wallace, Philip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith, Oxford University Press, 2004. Chang also makes a case against Parfit, Scanlon, and Raz that desires frequently provide reasons. For critical reaction to my paper above see Chris Heathwood, “Desire-Based Theories of Reasons, Pleasure, and Welfare,” (Chapter 4 in this volume) and Attila Tanyi, “Sobel on Pleasure, Reason, and Desire,” forthcoming in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, in addition to the Chang paper above.

<sup>9</sup> In conversation Parfit is inclined to place less weight on the claim that likings are not desires and more weight on the claim that subjectivists cannot appeal to the reason-giving power of future desires. While this downgrading of the “likings are not desires” argument might make sense in the context of the Agony Argument, Parfit will have to put real weight on this claim when trying to defend his “All or Nothing Argument.” The All or Nothing Argument concludes that desires never provide reasons. Obviously if likings were desires, then Parfit’s claim that likings provide reasons would undermine the All or Nothing Argument.

claimed that these sensations are in themselves good or bad in the sense that their intrinsic qualitative features or what they feel like, gives us reasons to like or dislike them. But we do not, I believe, have such reasons. . . . Whether we like, dislike, or are indifferent to these various sensations, we are not responding or failing to respond to any reasons.

When we are in pain, what is bad is not our sensation but our conscious state of having a sensation that we dislike. If we didn't dislike this sensation, our conscious state would not be bad.

When we are having some sensation that we intensely like or dislike, most of us also strongly want to be, or not to be in this conscious state. Such desires about such conscious states we can call meta-hedonic. Many people fail to distinguish between hedonic likings or disliking and such meta-hedonic states. But these states differ in several ways. [62–3]

Parfit goes on to offer four differences between meta-hedonic desires and likings. First, he says “What we dislike is some sensation. What we want is not to be having a sensation that we dislike. Our desire could be fulfilled either by our ceasing to have this sensation, or by our continuing to have it but ceasing to dislike it. No such claims apply to dislikes, which, unlike desires, cannot be fulfilled or unfulfilled.” [63] Second, we can only like or dislike sensations that we are experiencing. He writes “We cannot now dislike this future pain. . . . Unlike our meta-hedonic desires, our hedonic liking or disliking cannot be aimed at the future, or at what is merely possible. That is another reason why I do not call these mental states desires.” [63–4] Third, our likings can create reasons or “make some of our conscious states good or bad”. [64] Our desires cannot do so. Fourth, while we have no reasons to have or not to have our likings, we can have reasons to have meta-hedonic desires. For example, Parfit claims, we have reasons to desire not to be in agony. [64]

Recall what is relevant here. Parfit is offering a case that likings are not a kind of desire. Presumably this is because it is assumed that if likings were a kind of desire, subjective accounts would be in a good position to account for their reason-giving force. In making a case that likings are not a kind of desire, it is not helpful to claim that likings create reasons and desires do not, for that merely presupposes that which is at issue, namely that the two states are fundamentally different, without arguing for that conclusion. So the third difference Parfit points to begs the question in this context.<sup>10</sup> If it is true that likings can and desires cannot provide reasons, this must be

<sup>10</sup> Or would beg the question if offered as a reason to think likings are not a kind of desire, as seems a reasonable interpretation in the context. In conversation Parfit says he did not intend such an argument.

due to something that is different about the two states. Parfit is supposed to be explaining what that difference is.

Parfit tells us that there are two ways of satisfying a meta-hedonic desire, either by no longer minding a sensation you are feeling or by ceasing to feel that sensation. Likings are claimed to have no comparable feature. This feature of meta-hedonic desires is not a feature of all desires. Some desires cannot be similarly satisfied in two ways. If I want to smell a flower, I cannot satisfy this desire either by smelling the flower or by losing such a desire.

Parfit also says that desires can be satisfied but likings cannot. But both states are favorable psychological attitudes that have objects which we can either get or fail to get. Perhaps to Parfit "liking" suggests a relatively persisting favoring of a state which cannot be fulfilled by any particular instance of getting what one likes, whereas desire seems as though it is for a particular occasion. But this is a pretty shallow difference between desires and likings. A person who has a settled and permanent preference for Lagavulin over Talisker would not, in this sense, satisfy such a preference by getting one. Or perhaps the thought here is that likings do not take propositional attitudes whereas desires and the like do. While I admit that this is plausible, I am not sure it is true. We do not, after all, really literally like chocolate ice cream. Rather we like the taste of it. And I do not, in the relevant sense, like your tasting it but rather what I like is the sensation I get when I taste it. I am unsure what is at stake in insisting that it mischaracterizes things, rather than just sounds awkward in English, to say that what I like is that I am experiencing a certain flavor of sensation. However, even if this is a difference between likings and desiring, it does not help us see why the one could provide reasons and the other not.

Parfit says that we can only like current sensations and thus likings are unlike meta-hedonic desires which can aim at future states. But it seems that some subset of desires could share this feature. Perhaps desires which are directly satisfied only because of the phenomenology one is currently experiencing, for example, are similar to likings in this respect.

But most importantly, there are many different kinds of desires. Our question is not whether likings are different from some kinds of desires. Surely they are. Our question is whether likings are a sub-category of desire. Likings and meta-hedonic desires could be different, yet both sub-classes of desire. Many of the differences that Parfit points us to aim to show that there are differences between likings and meta-hedonic desires. But we can grant this and still claim that likings are a kind of desire. To be on point, we would need to be given an argument for thinking that if likings are not

meta-hedonic desires, they could not be some other kind of desire. Some of Parfit's arguments seem to lose sight of this.

If we thought that likings were a kind of desire, we would be unlikely to think that they were meta-hedonic desires. The object of a liking is a particular kind of feeling; say the taste of chocolate ice cream. But the object of meta-hedonic desires is not a particular phenomenology but any phenomenology which is favored in a certain way. If likings were a sub-class of desires, meta-hedonic desires would take that class of desires as its object. So anyone claiming that likings are a kind of desire should allow that likings are different from meta-hedonic desires.

There are some reasons to think that likings are a kind of desire or preference. Presumably if liking something provides a reason, liking it more provides a greater reason. This seems to be the thinking behind Parfit finding it obvious that we have a significant reason to avoid agony. I understand agony to be a sensation that one very strongly dislikes. So to understand the strength of reasons that liking provides we will have to compare the strength of liking. How might this be done? Any sensible way of ranking the degree of pleasantness of the options would seem to require that we put the different options in some way before the agent and look to the agent to render a verdict about the comparison. This suggests that perhaps we should mimic a popular story told by subjectivists and say that one should construct an idealized version of oneself who has had, and retained an accurate impression of, different things that one likes and dislikes. Then we might say that *X* is liked more than *Y* iff an agent intrinsically prefers experiencing state *X* over state *Y*, where the preference is for intrinsic qualitative features of the phenomenological state.

Perhaps it will be said that liking more is distinct from the sort of preference just mentioned. I doubt this, but suppose it is so. Still it is not clear what it could mean to say that one likes the feel of phenomenological state *x* more than *y* but does not have the above sort of intrinsic preference for the qualitative feel of phenomenological state *x* over *y*. Since the structure of Parfit's complaint is extensional in form, it actually does not matter for present purposes if liking more is identical with the above sort of preference or if the two states merely necessarily co-vary. So to resist what I am urging here one would have to claim that liking more can be captured in some way that does not necessarily co-vary with the above sort of preference.

Roger Crisp offers the following example alleged to show exactly this. "Imagine that I have never experienced serious pain. I might, during my first experience of it, desire it for its novelty, at least for a short time—and there is no need to think that I must somehow be enjoying the novelty.

I desire the pain for how it feels, but there is no enjoyment here.”<sup>11</sup> But I think this example is not telling. The person in his example desires the phenomenology because it is novel to them, not for an intrinsic qualitative feature of the phenomenology.

Let us step back a bit from the argument for and against the claim that liking is a kind of desire. This has seemed an important question for us to settle largely because we have so far been making two assumptions; first, that if likings were a kind of desire, that would ensure that subjectivism could explain their reason-giving power, and second, that if likings are not a kind of desire they cannot. But both of these assumptions seem false. Here I focus on the first assumption. I will address the second in the next section.

Subjectivists have wisely tended to deny that every desire provides a reason, claiming rather that some kinds of desires provide reasons and others do not. Thus a person might allow that likings are a kind of desire, yet claim that they are not the sort of desires that subjectivists can plausibly claim provide reasons. If this were true, then granting that likings are a kind of desire would not help the prospects for subjectivism.

As I have argued elsewhere, subjectivists should claim that intrinsic favoring and disfavoring attitudes ground reasons when they are accurately informed about what their object is like.<sup>12</sup> Such desires are more fully for their object as it really is rather than for the object as it is falsely believed to be. If this story were granted, there would be a fairly natural subjectivist story about why, if likings were a kind of desire, they would be the sort subjectivists can most plausibly claim have reason-giving authority. Desires for current phenomenology are uniquely accurately and fully informed about their object. Indeed, it might now seem a mark in the subjectivist's favor that we think that the cases in which we have the most confidence that our desires carry normative authority are cases in which we are most confident that we have excellent access to accurate information about what certain options are like. Matters of mere taste (where desires are commonly allowed to carry authority) tend to be cases where we have uncommon access to the relevantly informed vantage point. If likings were a kind of desire, subjectivists could account in a natural way for the reason-giving power of such states in a way that fits well with their broader approach. In other words, if likings were desires, they would be just the sort of desires

<sup>11</sup> Crisp, *Reasons and the Good*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 107. In conversation Crisp suggests that perhaps the novelty of the sensation is part of the sensation. See also Fred Feldman's "Two Questions about Pleasure," in *Philosophical Analysis*, ed. David Austin, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988, pp. 63–7. Reprinted in his *Utilitarianism, Hedonism, and Desert*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> "Subjectivism and Idealization."

that subjectivists can most plausibly grant authority to; namely those desires which are accurately informed about their object.

### FUTURE DESIRES

Parfit's claim that subjectivists can appeal only to current desires is not argued for but rather functions as a stipulation. Yet it obviously plays a large role in his argument. Later we will consider what might be motivating this stipulation, but for now let us accept it. I will argue that even with this stipulation in place, subjectivism has the resources to meet Parfit's challenge. Later I will argue that the stipulation does not cut philosophical theories at the most important joints.

One reason Parfit thinks subjectivists have trouble accounting for our current reason to avoid future agony is that what makes a state agony is not a desire. But if Parfit had such an argument in mind, there would be no need to focus on future agony rather than current agony. The distinct problem posed by the case of future agony concerns the transfer of reasons one will have in the future to reasons one has now on a subjectivist account. In the context of this argument, Parfit does not dispute that when we are in agony we necessarily have a desire to get out of it and that subjectivists can account for the reason we have to avoid current agony. The new problem posed by the case of future agony is about the insecurity, on the subjectivist account, of the transfer of reasons one will have in the future to avoid agony to reasons one has now to take steps to avoid it in the future.

He writes

I know that some future event would cause me to have some period of agony. Even after ideal deliberation, I have no desire to avoid this agony. . . .

Since I have no such desires or aims, subjective theories imply that I have no reason to want to avoid this agony, and no reason to try to avoid it, if I can. . . .

This case might be claimed to be impossible, because my state of mind would not be agony unless I had a strong desire not to be in this state. But this objection overlooks the difference between our attitudes to present and future agony. Though I know that, when I am later in agony, I shall have a strong desire not to be in this state, I might have no desire now to avoid this future agony. . . .

It might next be claimed that my predictable future desire not to be in agony gives me a desire-based reason now to want to avoid this agony. But this claim cannot be made by those who accept subjective theories of the kind that we are considering.

These people do not claim, and given their other assumptions could not claim, that our *future* desires give us reasons. [76–7]

Why should we think this transfer of future reasons to current reasons is insecure on a subjectivist account? As Parfit points out, it is clearly psychologically possible that the knowledge that we will have a strong desire in the future, say to avoid hell, fails to produce a strong desire in the agent now to take steps to avoid that situation. In some cases this might be because our current values are hostile to the values we will have in the future. If I am not now vicious but know I will become vicious in the future, I may be unmoved by the fact that I will have strong future desires to torture. These cases are difficult. Let's consider only cases where the agent's current values do not speak against the agent's future values.<sup>13</sup> Even in such cases, as the example of Hell shows, we can as a psychological matter fail to be moved by the thought that something will matter to us in the future. Parfit is clearly right that descriptive psychology will not ensure the proper transfer of desires in cases where we are certain there is a transfer of reasons.<sup>14</sup> In actual cases, the problem is usually that the future pain is, as Sidgwick put it, "foreseen but not fore felt".<sup>15</sup> The subjectivist suggestion that we provide agents with an accurate and retained impression of what the future agony will be like would surely go a long way to curing most actual cases of such irrationality. But Sidgwick thought that this would not solve all possible cases of such irrationality.<sup>16</sup>

If Sidgwick is right, subjectivists cannot rely on the causal impact of accurate information about possible futures to ensure that agents are moved by their future concerns. I will grant this.<sup>17</sup> Given that, the subjectivist can successfully respond to Parfit's challenge only by building in transfer principles into their account of ideal procedural deliberation which ensure

<sup>13</sup> One might think that the case in which my current evaluative outlooks speaks strongly against the values I will later have could provide a rationale for limiting the Reasons Transfer Principle (which will be discussed below). But Parfit is clearly committed to the view that one's own future agony provides reasons for one now regardless of one's current evaluative attitudes towards the person who will later be suffering that agony. Thus Parfit is poorly positioned to urge this rationale for limiting the Reasons Transfer Principle.

<sup>14</sup> And even if descriptive psychology in humans did guarantee such a transfer, there could be other kinds of agents with reasons in whom such transfers were not ensured by psychology. Since the subjectivist aspires to offer an account of reasons generally, and not just an account of the reasons for humans, this would be enough to secure Parfit's point.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed., Hackett, 1981, p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111–12.

<sup>17</sup> For more discussion on this topic, see my "Practical Reasons and Mistakes of Practical Rationality," *Moral Psychology*, ed. Sergio Tenenbaum, *Poznan Studies in the Philosophy of the Sciences and Humanities*, Rodopi, 2007, pp. 299–321.

that rational people will be moved today by the reasons they will have tomorrow. Parfit argues that, given their commitments, subjectivists cannot do this. He argues that “Subjectivists cannot claim that anyone who is fully rational would want to avoid all future agony.” [80]

Parfit considers arguments to the contrary by Michael Smith. (We will see later that Smith counts as a subjectivist for present purposes). Smith argues that those who are future Tuesday indifferent, for example, are making arbitrary distinctions and that the desires of such a person are less coherent and unified than the desires of someone who is not future Tuesday indifferent.<sup>18</sup> Smith is thinking that the subjectivist can help themselves to the claim that ideal procedural deliberation will result in desires that are coherent and unified. If all that were right, subjectivists could say that a person who does not give weight to future agony, but only to present agony, is making an arbitrary distinction. Such a person’s preferences are less coherent and unified and it is for these reasons that an ideal procedural deliberator would not make such arbitrary distinctions and would want to avoid all future agony.

Parfit replies that such arguments are unavailable to the subjectivist. Parfit argues that

Our preferences draw arbitrary distinctions when, and because, what we prefer is in no way preferable. It is arbitrary to prefer one of two things if there are no facts about these things that give us any reason to have this preference. . . . To explain why this preference is arbitrary, we must claim that (1) if some ordeal would be on a future Tuesday, this fact does not give us any reason to care about it less. . . . [M]ost of us would always prefer to have one of two ordeals, if, and because this ordeal would be less painful. To explain why this preference is not arbitrary, we must claim that (2) if some ordeal would be less painful, this fact does give us a reason to care about it less. (1) and (2) are claims about object-given reasons. Since Subjectivists deny that we have such reasons, these people cannot appeal to such claims, or to the “minimal principle” that Smith states . . . [80]

In response to this argument I will first make a case that to claim that only non-subjectivists can appeal to object-given reasons is question-begging in this context and so the argument needs reformulation. I offer a reformulation and then go on to offer grounds for resisting what I take to be the general thought Parfit urges here.

Parfit defines objective theories as those that claim that “there are certain facts that give us reasons both to have certain desires and aims, and to do

<sup>18</sup> Michael Smith, “Desires, Values, Reasons, and the Dualism of Practical Reason,” in *Ratio: Special Issue: Parfit’s On What Matters*, ed. John Cottingham and Jussi Suikkanen, 22, 2009: 98–125.

whatever might achieve these aims. These reasons are given by facts about the objects of these desires or aims. . . .” Hence he calls such reasons “object-given” reasons. [57] He defines subjective theories as those that claim that “our reasons for acting are all provided by, or depend upon, certain facts about what would fulfill or achieve our present desires or aims. . . . Since these are all facts about us, we can call these reasons subject-given.” [57] We have no reason to have the desires which (allegedly) provide subject-given reasons (ignoring, as I do throughout, state-based reasons).

Parfit’s understanding of the subjective/objective distinction is in terms of whether or not there are correct standards for what one has reason to desire. To the extent that there are, to that extent objectivism is correct, he claims. But, on this way of marking the divide, it is irrelevant what provides those standards. A desire-based reason for P to O would be subject-given at the time the agent has the initial desire to O because she would have no reason to have that desire. But if a future desire to get out of future agony provides P a current reason to want to avoid this future agony, this should count for Parfit as an object-given reason. One would then have a reason to have this desire. It would then be due to facts about the object of the current desire, namely that it will be desired later, which provides the reason to desire it now. To assume that only objectivists can grant authority to object-given reasons is therefore to assume that ideal procedural deliberation cannot require one to care now about the fact that one will later care about something. And this is directly question-begging in the context of the argument Parfit is giving.

So the problem with the subjectivist appealing to principles like (1) and (2) above is not that this would be to appeal to an object-given reason. And, since Parfit grants that subjectivists can account for our reasons to avoid current agony, the principle that the subjectivist really needs to rely on is not like Parfit’s (1) and (2) above, but rather something more like what I will call the Reasons Transfer Principle. It states that: If one will later have a reason to get O, then one now has a reason to facilitate the later getting of O.<sup>19</sup> Parfit needs to make a case that subjectivists cannot appeal to such a principle even when the reasons that would transfer via the principle are all based on contingent desires.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, to defeat the Agony Argument it would be sufficient for the subjectivist to appeal to the Future Reasons Stemming from Avoiding Agony Transfer Principle. But I suppose that if this latter principle is correct, its truth is explained by something more general such as the Reasons Transfer Principle. As it is, the Reasons Transfer Principle is an unhappily vague placeholder for a more detailed principle. I hope it at least conveys a general spirit of the direction I have hopes for.

I am forced to speculate about why Parfit thinks subjectivists cannot appeal to such a principle. I would guess Parfit wants to say that such principles, according to subjectivism, must themselves be supported and approved by an agent's contingent concerns. But that is not the case. Analogously, Christine Korsgaard claimed that subjectivists need a separate principle enjoining one to take the means to one's authoritative ends. She thought that once the subjectivist champions categorical imperatives of the form "take the means to your ends whether you feel like it or not", she has lost principled grounds for resisting further categorical imperatives.<sup>20</sup> I think this is mistaken for two reasons. First, I don't think saying that one has a reason to take the means to achieve something is an additional claim over and above the claim that one has a reason to achieve something. The former claim seems partially constitutive of the claim that one has a reason. Second, suppose that the claim about taking the means was an additional principle. Still, the reason to serve that principle, according to subjectivism, is that in doing so one will serve one's concerns. The person who thinks contingent concerns provide all ultimate reasons has a principled rationale for letting in claims such as the Reasons Transfer Principle and resisting claims such as that everyone has a reason to aid those in distress. The former serves the agent's concerns whatever those concerns may be. The latter need not.

Sometimes I think people mistakenly assume that a proper subjectivist view can never tell people to do anything that they do not currently want to do. But this is just wrong. Most obviously, the subjectivist is not saying that the principle that one's concerns of the right sort provide reasons itself is up for assessment by anyone's concerns. Not only can a subjectivist make such a claim, it seems to me a subjectivist must make such a claim. After all, subjectivism claims one's desires provide reasons. If an agent's lack of a contingent ratification of that claim meant that, for her, desires do not create reasons, then subjectivism would be false, at least about that agent's reasons. Further, the actual agent may not care about what she would want after ideal procedural deliberation. Still the view says that her reactions after such deliberation determine her reasons. What counts as ideal procedural deliberation is not itself responsive to one's wants or concerns.<sup>21</sup> That is

<sup>20</sup> Christine Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason," in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> However, Bernard Williams, "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame," in his *Making Sense of Humanity*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 37, claims that sound deliberation includes accurate factual information because "any rational deliberative agent has in his S a general interest in being factually informed." I criticize this justification in my "Explanation, Internalism, and Reasons for Action," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18(2) (Summer 2001): 218–35 (also appears in E.R. Paul, F.D. Miller, and J. Paul (eds.) *Moral Epistemology*, Cambridge University Press, 2001.)

why subjectivists tend to offer a one-size-fits-all account of what is involved in ideal procedural deliberation.<sup>22</sup>

The subjectivist who claims that ideal procedural deliberation involves caring about one's future concerns is not assessing the content of one's future concerns and whether the objects of such concerns are worthy of being desired. Rather such a subjectivist principle is only concerned with whether one comes to care about the option as a result of an accurate understanding of it. The principle that one should now care about what one will later care about gives one no guidance until one starts to care about this rather than that for no good reason. It is in this sense that I am saying that such a view borrows no objectivist principles about what is worth caring about in the first instance. It is quite different from claiming that a person has a desire-independent reason to be moral or eat chocolate. The claim involves only the thought that if one will care about something later, one should now care about that fact. This seems continuous with the idea that one's passions set the ultimate goals and further reasons are hostage to what promotes our ultimate goals. Reason is still the scout or slave to the passions. Can it really be true that it is a distinctively anti-subjectivist principle that one should act so as to maximally comply with one's subjectively determined reasons over one's life?

Parfit thinks subjectivists can help themselves to procedural but not substantive requirements. He tells us that we "can be procedurally rational whatever else we care about, or want to achieve" [79] and, seconding Rawls, he adds that "knowing that people are rational, we do not know the ends they will pursue, only that they will pursue them intelligently." [80] If there were no standards for what we should ultimately want in the first instance but only standards for how to intelligently achieve what one wants over time, that seems to be in accord with these platitudes about ideal procedural deliberation. The view I am suggesting claims that there are procedural principles that determine one's authoritative ends, but these principles do not require us to have any particular substantive end. Further there are principles that require us to effectively pursue our authoritative ends over time, but these principles require us to effectively pursue whatever we will want in the relevant way, without importing any objectivist principles about which ultimate ends are worth wanting.

It may be that Parfit is thinking that to be properly formal or procedural in the relevant sense, a requirement must not place constraints on acceptable outputs of deliberation but only provide inputs to deliberation.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> But see Rosati's "Internalism and the Good for a Person," *Ethics* 106 (January 1996): 297–326.

<sup>23</sup> Parfit offered this thought in conversation.

So, for example, one might think that the requirement that one's desire be informed is procedural in this sense because it does not insist that only certain substantive ends can be desires in the relevant way once one is so informed. However, Parfit might say, the requirement that one cares now about one's future cares is a requirement about the acceptable output of deliberation and so not procedural. In response, I would say that surely the requirement that one's desires be, for example, transitive has always been taken to be a formal or procedural requirement fully compatible with a subjectivist approach. Yet this is a formal requirement on acceptable outputs of deliberation.

Finally, and most importantly, suppose I am wrong, and subjectivists must abandon subjectivism to make claims like the Reasons Transfer Principle. The subjectivist would then be forced to abandon the label "subjectivism", but look at what they get in return. The resulting objectivist view would claim that all our reasons ultimately derive from concerns we have no reasons to have and that additional derived reasons are restricted to that which provides clever ways to achieve lives that involve getting as much of what we really want over time as possible. Parfit is here making no case that such a view would be false, but rather only that it would not count as subjectivist. In that case, I urge subjectivists to get over the loss of the label and accept such a view.

#### PARFIT'S ACCOUNT OF THE OBJECTIVE/ SUBJECTIVE DISTINCTION

That concludes my direct reply to the Agony Argument. Now I want to consider how Parfit understands the distinction between objective and subjective theories and show that he has a surprisingly narrow understanding of subjectivism. Recall that Parfit tells us that objective views claim that there are facts about the objects of our desires and aims which provide reasons to have these desires and aims. Subjectivists, on the other hand, claim that our reasons are provided by "certain facts about what would fulfill or achieve our present desires or aims." [57]

But what explains why desires, aims (and, Parfit sometimes adds, intentions) are the only attitudes that the subjectivist can champion as reason-giving? Even if we assume that likings are not a kind of desire, it is still an interesting question whether likings belong on the list of attitudes which naturally should be classed as subjectivist-friendly.

So how should we approach the question of whether likings should be classed among the subjectivist-friendly set of attitudes? Parfit does not

address this question. I think it useful to begin with an attempt to interpret what subjectivists and objectivists have been disagreeing about. Here is an interpretation of this dispute which is simple, clear, and seems to me what people have meant to be arguing about.

The central question subjectivists and objectivists have been disagreeing about is: What is the ultimate source of our reasons? Is it merely that we happen to favor certain options and disfavor others or are there standards independent of such pro and con reactions which determine what we have reason to do? Do our favoring and disfavoring attitudes gild and stain the world with reason-providing status or do our options already have the reason-providing status independently of our happening to go for some options and not for others? Subjectivists think the agent's favorable or unfavorable stance towards an option determines whether that agent has a reason to get the option. Objectivists think the reason to get an option is not determined by the agent's conative stance toward it. I think this is the best way to understand the dispute between subjectivists and objectivists. But if that is right, what distinguishes them is that the former regards our broadly pro and con attitudes as the ultimate source of our reasons. And then we would naturally class both liking and desiring as in this class of attitudes. And so those who grant that such states are an important source of reasons, such as Parfit, will be committed to a serious subjectivist component in their account of what provides reasons. Call subjectivism so understood "pro attitude" subjectivism.

Of course, this is not how Parfit understands the distinction between subjectivism and objectivism. He restricts the subjectivist to the current attitudes of desire, intention, and aims. He does not offer a general intuitive understanding of what the subjective/objective dispute is about. However, it is crucial to Parfit to show us that a key mistake of 20th century discussions of normativity is that many have "conflated normativity and motivating force."<sup>24</sup> I think it illuminating to understand Parfit as thinking that subjectivists are the people who have made exactly this mistake. And certainly many prominent thinkers in the Humean and Kantian traditions have wanted to cash out normativity in terms of motivational states. It should be noted that Parfit finds Kantians just as guilty of this conflation as Humeans.

Parfit stipulatively understands subjectivism to include only views that limit their list of normatively authoritative attitudes to motivational attitudes. This, for him, is what unites the list of attitudes he offers the

<sup>24</sup> "Normativity," in R. Shafer-Landau (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, volume 1, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 337.

subjectivist: desires, intentions, and aims. And this is why it is important to him that likings are not a kind of desire. He must be thinking that likings are not essentially tied to motivation. For if he thought they were, then, given his broad conception of desire according to which a desire is “any state of being motivated, or of wanting something to happen and being to some degree disposed to make it happen, if we can”, he would not resist calling “likings” desires. But he does. It is a fair question how to fully understand likings such that they are not essentially tied to motivational states, but Parfit is clearly committed to such an understanding of likings. Parfit’s goal, I believe, is to show how we can capture many of the reasons that seemed to most obviously require motivationally charged desires, with non-motivational likings. For him, I speculate, the fight between objectivists and subjectivists is the fight between those who think that “there seems nothing for value to be, on deepest reflection, wholly apart from what moves, or could move, valuers, agents for whom something can matter” and those that dispute this.<sup>25</sup> Call subjectivism so understood “motivational” subjectivism.

Parfit’s Agony Argument is attempting to make a case against motivational subjectivism, but doing so in a manner which fits quite nicely with pro-attitude subjectivism. The Agony Argument may or may not be a good reason to reject motivational subjectivism but it could not provide a reason to reject pro-attitude subjectivism.

The Agony Argument, even if successful in its own terms, does not rule out the view that all of our reasons are ultimately provided by our just happening, for no good reason, to find favor with some options and disfavor with others. If we adopt Parfit’s taxonomy, we can nonetheless say that subjectivism is refuted. But to my ear that would exaggerate and mislead about what the Agony Argument would have accomplished. To vindicate the claim that not all of our reasons are provided by our happening to favor certain options, Parfit will have to go beyond championing reasons that flow from our liking current phenomenological states. He will have to offer us something more like the Traditional Extensional Argument against subjectivism which claimed that we have reasons to be moral regardless of whether doing so answers to anything that happens to matter to us.

Parfit, recall, introduces subjective theories as those theories that only appeal to the authority of present desires or aims. This claim functions as a stipulation. Our assumption that Parfit is only arguing against motivational

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, “Towards *Fin de Siecle* Ethics: Some Trends,” *Philosophical Review* (1992): 115–89, at pp. 176–7. This passage is disapprovingly quoted by Parfit on pp. 101–2 of *On What Matters*.

subjectivism provided an answer as to why he limited the subjectivist to desires, intentions, and aims. But why does Parfit stipulate that only *current* motivational attitudes can provide current reasons on a subjectivist account? There is an obvious answer which again narrows his understanding of subjectivism.

Williams influentially claimed that if someone has a reason to  $\phi$ , it must be possible for that person to be motivated to  $\phi$  via sound deliberation.<sup>26</sup> If Parfit has a Williamsian Internalist picture in mind, his stipulation that subjectivists can help themselves only to the authority of current motivational states makes perfect sense. The key thought behind Williamsian Internalism is that normative reasons must be capable of explaining actions, at least after sound deliberation. If we agree with this, we will have to tie current reasons to motivations at the time of the possible action. Future desires could not explain earlier actions. So only current desires (perhaps after ideal deliberation) are fit to play the explanatory role that Williamsian Internalism demands.

I am suggesting that we can best understand Parfit's unexplained stipulation that subjectivists can only appeal to current desires if he is taking subjectivism to just be Williamsian Internalism. This would also explain why the distinction between Humeans and Kantians does not much interest him as both tend to accept Williamsian Internalism. Understanding Parfit to have in mind Williamsian Internalism when he uses the word "subjectivism" makes sense of an otherwise inexplicable feature of Parfit's view: namely restricting the subjectivist to current desires the agent has after sound deliberation.<sup>27</sup>

It is, I hypothesize, because Parfit really has Williamsian Internalism in mind that he is unconcerned with pro-attitude subjectivism or with "a temporally neutral desire-based theory" which does not appeal only to the reason-giving power of current desires. [77] Of the latter, Parfit merely says "These imagined theories are also very different from the subjective theories we are now considering." [77] This despite the fact that on such views only desires ultimately provide reasons. The Agony Argument, we are forced to conclude, does not aspire to argue against the view that only desires we have no reason to have ultimately provide reasons. Rather, the real target is Williamsian Internalism.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, "Internal and External Reasons, in his *Moral Luck*, Oxford University Press, 1981.

<sup>27</sup> In an earlier version of *On What Matters*, Parfit argued for the claim that subjectivists were committed to appealing only to current desires by attributing to some of them Williamsian Internalism as I describe it above. Such arguments have now been removed and the restriction now functions as a stipulation.

Parfit's stipulation categorizes a surprising range of views that seemed subjectivist, such as the temporally neutral desire-based theory above, as objectivist. Further, if Parfit is equating Williamsian Internalism with subjectivism, then his understanding of subjectivism is idiosyncratic in that it includes many Kantian views. He certainly does target many Kantians as well as Humeans with his Agony Argument. His understanding of subjectivism would be further idiosyncratic in that most think Williamsian Internalism an argument for subjectivism, not the thing itself. Most would grant, I think, that Parfit's categorization excludes some subjectivist-seeming theories from counting as subjectivist. However, because I think the form of subjectivism that Parfit and I agree is the most plausible must reject Williamsian Internalism, I think Parfit's understanding of subjectivism to be even narrower than it appears.

The idealized soundly deliberating agent is quite different from the actual agent whose reasons we are concerned with. Maybe the actual agent has a reason to become better informed about some matter, but the idealized agent has no such reason. This has led the state-of-the-art subjectivist views to move to what are called "Ideal Advisor" account in which it is the wants of the idealized agent for the actual agent which are the relevant attitudes.<sup>28</sup> But on such a picture, no one need be motivated to do what the theory claims the actual agent has a reason to do. The idealized agent would have no motivation to herself go and read the information she already knows. And the actual agent, of course, may well not be motivated to 0 as she has not yet deliberated soundly. Thus there is no one on this picture who need be motivated to 0. Such a view claims that normative reasons to 0 may well fail to motivate anyone to 0, even the agent who has soundly deliberated. Thus the most promising path for subjectivists to take, namely an idealized advisor account, seems incompatible with Williams's requirement that a reason to 0 must be capable of motivating an agent to 0 after sound deliberation. The Ideal Advisor version of subjectivism does not ensure that reasons must be capable of serving as explanations. In the story I just told, no one was motivated to get more information, yet this does not cast doubt on the thought that if the idealized agent would intrinsically want the actual agent to intrinsically want to 0, the actual agent has a reason to 0.<sup>29</sup> Thus I claim the best versions of subjectivism must leave

<sup>28</sup> I believe Peter Railton, in "Facts and Values," *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986): 5–29, was the first to adopt this now popular move.

<sup>29</sup> See Robert Johnson's "Internal Reasons and the Conditional Fallacy," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 49(194) (January 1999): 53–71. See also my "Explanation, Internalism, and Reasons for Action." In my paper, I conclude that the subjectivist needs to reject Williamsian Internalism.

Williamsian Internalism behind. So the best subjectivist view, the Idealized Advisor account, the view Parfit seems to allow is the most plausible version of subjectivism, is actually not an instance of subjectivism as Parfit understands it. Yet such reasons to fear for Williamsian Internalism now seem rather unconnected to the question of whether our reasons are determined by what we happen to favor.

The Agony Argument, we are forced to conclude, makes no case against the claim that all our reasons are provided by our just happening, for no good reason, to ultimately favor some options and disfavor others. Given this, I think Parfit's claim that it has the potential to refute subjectivism relies on a surprisingly narrow understanding of subjectivism.

I want to now briefly consider an argument that it might appear Parfit is offering. I do not claim that Parfit intends the argument I will consider here, but it is worth noticing why he is in no position to press such an argument.

In summing up why our desires could not provide us with normative reasons, Parfit writes:

We can have desire-based reasons to have some desire, and we can have long chains of instrumental desire-based reasons and desires. But at the beginning of any of these chains, we have seen there must always be some desire or aim that we have no such reason to have. And as my examples help us to see, we cannot defensibly claim that such desires or aims give us reasons. . . . So subjective theories are built on sand. [88]

Such reasons would have to be provided by some desire or aim that we have no reason to have, and such desires or aims cannot be defensibly claimed to give us any reasons. So, we can now conclude that, on these widely accepted views, nothing matters. [99]

It might appear that the claim is that, quite generally, a state cannot provide a reason unless one also has a reason to be in that state. I think it is correct that subjective accounts must claim that the ultimately reason-providing states are states one has no reason to be in.<sup>30</sup> But Parfit also thinks that one has no reason to like certain states, yet he claims that liking a state provides one with a reason. Thus he is in no position to urge the quite general thesis. And the quite general thesis is suspect precisely because it seems unable to make room for our reasons in matters of mere taste, as well as threatening an infinite regress of reasons. So if we read Parfit as appealing to the quite general thesis, we must convict him of a mistake. Perhaps it would be better if we read him as not appealing to the quite general thesis, but rather to be

<sup>30</sup> But see David Schmidtz, "Choosing Ends," *Ethics* 104 (January 1994): 226–51 and Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions*, chapter 10.

baldly asserting that desires one has no reason to have, unlike likings one has no reason to have, cannot provide reasons. So understood, this claim is not argued for and in no way adds to his case against subjectivism.

## OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

In this section, I will consider three objections to my view. We can call them the Nagel Argument, the Williams's Explanation Argument, and the Reasons Transfer Principle is False Argument.

Nagel, in *The Possibility of Altruism*, pointed out that we might think one's reasons are relative to three different points of view: an agent's current time-slice, an agent over time, or the entire interpersonal group of which the agent is a member.<sup>31</sup> He suggested that perhaps there was no good rationale for moving from the time-slice view and to the agent over time which was not also a rationale for moving to the point of view of the group. If this were right, one might think that there is no rationale for the kind of subjectivism that I champion here. It insists that we need to heed the point of view of the agent over time. That is the upshot of the Reasons Transfer Principle—even if one's current time-slice is unconcerned with successor concerns, she is required to care for her successor's concerns. Yet we are not similarly required to care about the concerns of other people. Why isn't this an arbitrary position in the way Nagel thought?

I want to say that everything hangs here on the best metaphysical understanding of the nature of the agent we are offering an account of reasons for. If there were creatures that were time-slices and not identical over time with future inhabitants of the same body parts, then the subjectivist should say that for such creatures the appropriate point of view is the time-slice. However, I have been presupposing the commonsense view that the agents we are familiar with are temporally extended creatures. We are identical over time. If this were metaphysically true of an agent, then it is not arbitrary to say that the reasons of such a creature are responsive to the concerns of all of its parts.<sup>32</sup> The concerns of the group of which the agent is a member, no matter how real, are not similarly the concerns of the agent whose reasons we are discussing.

A common picture people seem to have is that subjectivists must start from the point of view of the time-slice's concerns and argue that time-slice

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Princeton University Press, 1970.

<sup>32</sup> Nagel wrote, "I contend that one can ask of a practical principle or a reason for action whether it is consistent with the conception of oneself as a person extended in time, or whether the acceptance of it must be dissociated from that conception." p. 63.

into caring about the whole agent before the Reasons Transfer Principle could be appropriate. But of course that would just be to say that the Principle is false and that reasons only transfer if one now happens to care about one's future self. But I see no reason to start from only the concerns of the current time-slice given that we are supposing that the creature we are offering an account of reasons for also has concerns in the future. That now seems to arbitrarily privilege the present time-slice even though the later concerns are just as much those of the agent whose reasons we are discussing.<sup>33</sup>

Second, a frequent response to this chapter is that the form of subjectivism I urge fails to capture Williams's rationale for internalism. Williams thought he could use the premise that our reasons must be capable of motivating us, at least after sound deliberation, to the conclusion that only broadly Humean considerations provide an agent with reasons. This thought, if it is often urged on me, is in conflict with the Reasons Transfer Principle because an agent may just fail to be motivated by their future concerns. It is in the context of arguments such as this, as I interpret her, that Korsgaard make her telling reply to Williams.<sup>34</sup> She said, in essence, that when we are wondering, in the context of Williams's argument, what does and does not count as sound deliberation, we cannot at that point redeploy Williams's requirement that reasons be capable of motivating after sound deliberation as an argument that certain patterns of reasoning are not part of sound deliberation. To do so would abandon Williams's claim that normative reasons motivate after sound deliberation in favor of the view that reasons necessarily motivate whether one has engaged in sound deliberation or not. And, as she pointed out, that is not a compelling thought.

The upshot of Korsgaard's good point is that in developing our understanding of sound deliberation, questions of what motivates are irrelevant. If a principle is part of sound deliberation, then that which motivates when using that principle thereby motivates after sound deliberation. And that is the only relevant motivational constraint that Williams urged or that it

<sup>33</sup> Obviously the main thesis of this chapter is that Parfit's Agony Argument does not provide good reason to reject subjectivism. That could be true even if other arguments, such as the Nagel Argument, did. I do not purport to show here that there are no good arguments against subjectivism. But I do try to blunt the force of the Nagel Argument above.

<sup>34</sup> I have in mind mainly Korsgaard's presentation in "Skepticism about Practical Reason," in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge University Press, 1996. However, I resist the direction of Korsgaard's "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason," in Garrett Gaut and Berys Cullity (eds.) *Ethics and Practical Reason*, Oxford University Press, 1997, in my "Subjective Accounts of Reasons for Action," *Ethics* 111 (April 2001): 461–92.

would be sensible to urge. So the Reasons Transfer Principle cannot be argued against on the grounds that reasons must be capable of motivating. We must argue about its status, as with all alleged principles of sound deliberation, on a different level. The requirement that reasons be capable of motivating after sound deliberation must help itself to a conception of sound deliberation before the motivational constraint can be deployed. Thus motivational issues cannot properly help us decide what is and what is not part of proper deliberation.

Third, one might well say that the Reasons Transfer Principle is false or in any case quite controversial. So far I have mainly made a case that the principle is compatible with subjectivism and that it would accommodate Parfit's sensible claim that we have current reasons to avoid future agony, not that it is true. But one might think that the rationales for allowing that future desires provide reasons would also require that past desires for then-future states of affairs must also provide current reasons. But, the worry might continue, it is not at all clear that this latter claim is true. Consider a desire one has when one is young to drive the fire truck when one is 50. Does this past desire, long abandoned, give one any reason to drive the fire truck in middle age? Intuitively, it seems not. But if past desires do not create current reasons, why should we think future desires do so?<sup>35</sup>

While it is true that I have not made much of a case for the truth of the Reasons Transfer Principle (beyond its considerable intuitiveness), this objection does not provide a good reason to doubt the Principle.<sup>36</sup> The Principle takes no stand on what gives one an ultimate reason to do something. It merely says that one has a reason now to do what one can to facilitate acting in accord with the reasons one will have. The principle is completely compatible with the claim that only the satisfaction of now-for-now desires provides ultimate reasons.<sup>37</sup> If only the satisfaction of now-for-now desires provides ultimate reasons, then one would have no reason to ride the fire truck in one's 50s. That is, in this imagined scenario, the Principle would only give one reasons to put oneself in a position to satisfy now-for-now desires. Since riding the fire truck now would satisfy no now-for-now desires, the Principle would not give one reason to do so. But if all and only now-for-now desires provide ultimate reasons, then the

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Tom Hurka for helpfully pressing such a worry on me.

<sup>36</sup> I acknowledge that cases in which one's current values speak against one's future values need more discussion than I have provided here if we are to feel fully comfortable with the Reasons Transfer Principle.

<sup>37</sup> A now-for-now desire refers to a current desire one has to get something now. A desire one has at age 5 to ride a fire truck when one is 50 would be a now-for-then desire. This terminology is due to R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking*, Oxford University Press, 1981.

Principle would now give one reason to take steps to be able to facilitate the satisfaction of future now-for-now desires. On the hypothesis that only now-for-now desires provide reasons, we would have a natural explanation, completely compatible with the Principle, for why past desires such as the one to ride a fire truck when one is 50 would not transfer to the future, for there is nothing one can now do to facilitate acting in accord with the reason one has to ride the fire truck for one has no reason to do so. The point is general. The Principle takes no stand on what creates reasons. It merely says that one has reason now to facilitate one's ability to act in accord with whatever reasons one will have.<sup>38</sup> If subjectivists cannot provide a compelling account of our ultimate reasons (the reasons that would transfer via the Reasons Transfer Principle), then subjectivism has big problems. But if it can do so (and Parfit's Agony Argument provides no reason to think they cannot), then there is no reason to think the subjectivist must awkwardly alter their view of ultimate reasons in order to fit comfortably with the Reasons Transfer Principle. In sum, there is no pressure on the subjectivist who would champion the Reasons Transfer Principle to accept the claim that past now-for-then desires now provide one with a reason.

#### HEATHWOOD

Scanlon and Parfit have each attempted to account for our reasons in matters of mere taste without allowing that desires ever create reasons, by claiming that pleasure or enjoyment is the source of such reasons. In previous work, I argued that this attempt failed because enjoyment only looks like a tempting account for such reasons if we have a desire-based account of enjoyment (or in any case make enjoyment into a subjectivist-friendly attitude).<sup>39</sup>

Chris Heathwood agrees with this, but denies that this is bad news for the attempt to account for such reasons without granting reason-giving status to desires.<sup>40</sup> He thinks we can allow that pleasure provides reasons in matters of mere taste, accept a desire-based account of pleasure, and yet

<sup>38</sup> There are significant questions about the Principle that I do not yet have answers to. Suppose, for example, I may develop a future desire to paint but I may not. How does this affect my current reasons? The Reasons Transfer Principle, one might well complain, does not speak directly enough to this issue. A fully developed theory along the lines I am suggesting would need to answer such questions.

<sup>39</sup> "Pain for Objectivists."

<sup>40</sup> Heathwood, "Desire-Based Theories of Reasons, Pleasure, and Welfare" (Chapter 4 in this volume).

deny both that desires ground any reasons and that a subjectivist account of our reasons is correct even just about reasons of mere taste. Heathwood maintains that these claims can all be true for two key reasons. First, subjective accounts cannot appeal to future desires to ground reasons and second, desires are only one component in the state that creates the reason and so subjectivists are wrong to think that desires themselves provide reasons.

Heathwood's main argument for the claim that subjectivists cannot grant authority to future desires is that such a position is incompatible with the best arguments out there for subjectivism, such as Williams's "Explanation Argument". He is claiming that a subjectivist account that claimed that future desires provide reasons would not have the features that have attracted people to subjectivism. I disagree with Heathwood about whether the arguments he considers for subjectivism rule out granting authority to future desires. I accept that Williams's "explanation argument" is incompatible with granting authority to future desires unless we think, as I do, that ideally sound deliberators must reason in accord with something like what I call the "reasons transfer principle." Here I will just need to rely on my arguments above for this claim.

Heathwood also claims that the complex state of having an experience, together with wanting that experience as one is having it, creates the reason, not the desire on its own. He thinks the resulting view would not count as desire-based. I find this argument a bit confusing. Two people might have the same experience. One wants it as they are experiencing it and the other does not. This is what makes it the case that the former but not the latter had a reason to get that experience. On his view, it does not matter what the experience is like, it only matters that one desire it as one is experiencing it. So far, the only role for the experience to play in providing the reason is to be the object of the desire. Further, Heathwood allows, nothing about the experience itself makes it the case that we should or should not desire it. Because he allows that whatever experience desire hits on is thereby something one has reason to get, it is tempting to think that desires are doing all the normative work and the experience is just serving as the object of the desire.

The subjectivist thinks that it is because one wants something that getting it is valuable for one or that one has reasons to bring about that state. If this were correct, then when some situation is valuable for one (I will focus on this case for simplicity), that is because there is something that the agent gets which they wanted. Insofar as one thinks that what is valuable for one is the combination of getting an option and wanting it, this seems merely a notational variation on the ordinary subjectivist proposal. Insisting that there also be an object of the desire around to play a role in

benefiting the agent is not an additional component beyond what the subjectivist is already committed to.

Perhaps a better way to understand Heathwood's thinking here involves recalling that he so far has only allowed that some desires are associated with reasons. He is only granting that desires are associated with reasons when the object of the desire is a current phenomenological experience. If desires themselves were reason providing, he might claim, then it would not matter what the object of the desire was. I would claim that the most plausible explanation for why our desires over current phenomenological states have authority is that our desires which are accurately informed about their objects generally have authority and that we are uncommonly accurately informed about current phenomenology. So I think the subjectivist can offer the most compelling explanation of why such desires have an especially obvious kind of authority and that such an explanation points to a broader normative role for informed desires.

Heathwood also claims that the position which allows that desire is a key component in pleasure and that pleasure provides reasons is compatible with the best objection to desire-based accounts—namely, that on such views our reasons are problematically arbitrary. Why wouldn't our reasons of mere taste be similarly arbitrary on the view Heathwood is developing? Heathwood's answer is that such experiential states which are desired while one is experiencing them are good states to be in. And we can see this by noticing that such states are good states to be in regardless of whether one has a desire to be in such a state. But I would have said that if one can build the desire into the state we are assessing, then the subjectivist too can say that what makes that state valuable for the agent is not her attitude towards the state but the state itself. In sum, I do not see how it can be successfully maintained that on the subjectivist's view reasons are problematically arbitrary but that on Heathwood's view, which claims that whatever experiential state one desires is valuable for one to be in, reasons are not problematically arbitrary.

## CONCLUSION

It is because I prefer chocolate ice cream to vanilla that I have a reason to eat it rather than vanilla. Several contemporary philosophers have sought to deny this and ground such reasons in something other than a contingent favoring psychological attitude. Some of these philosophers hope to ground such reasons in hedonic tone or in the objectively bad things that happen when our desires are frustrated. I have argued elsewhere that such claims are

unsuccessful.<sup>41</sup> Here I have argued that the likings that Parfit thinks can provide reasons are best thought of as the sort of psychological attitude that subjectivists have had in mind all along and so do not provide an important alternative to subjectivism. I have also argued that subjectivism is unscathed by Parfit's Agony Argument. If I am right about all this, the most interesting next question is whether objective accounts can convincingly concede that subjectivists are right that it is desires that provide our reasons in matters of mere taste without such objective accounts looking ad hoc and fundamentally disunited.<sup>42</sup> In future work, I will argue that the reasons provided by desires in matters of mere taste are the thin end of the wedge and that subjective accounts have significant advantages in accounting for such reasons. It may be that objectivists have at least tacitly acknowledged the force of this pattern of argumentation once subjectivism is granted this thin end of the wedge. This perhaps partly explains the surprising efforts to deny that desires ever provide reasons.

<sup>41</sup> Sobel, "Pain for Objectivists."

<sup>42</sup> Chang, "Can Desires Provide Reasons for Action?", makes a preliminary case that objective accounts can avoid this lack of unity. I remain skeptical.