How to be a Subjectivist[[1]](#footnote-1)

David Sobel

12/24/17

The *Euthyphro* poses one of the most basic and profound question about why things are valuable. Are things valuable because they are valued or are things appropriately valued because they are valuable? Do our attitudes, as Hume says, guild and stain the world with value or are there already established normative facts prior to our stance towards the world that determine what we ought to value? Subjectivists are the folks who think the former is the case.

The lesson of the *Euthyphro* was that the fully subjectivist direction of explanation looks misguided in some normative realms. The sensible subjectivist accepts that our attitudes are not a plausible ground of truth for all kinds of normativity, most obviously morality, for just the reasons Socrates outlined. But the subjectivist is more optimistic about the prospects of the attitudes grounding normativity in other, more individualized, contexts. Two contexts that have been especially tempting areas for subjectivist theorists are well-being and reasons for action. Our subjectivist will claim that in these contexts it is the agent’s own attitudes that determine what is good for her or what she has reason to do.

After very briefly discussing what the more plausible versions of subjectivism might look like, and mentioning and contrasting a few neighboring views, we will get down to describing how a subjectivist might try to defend their view.

What is Valuing?

What is it to value something? Clearly it is to take some sort of psychological attitude towards an object. Plausibly, just believing something is valuable is one way of valuing an option. But such valuing states, to my mind, are less plausible as accounts of what grounds value.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is not very tempting to my mind to think that things are valuable because we think they are. If we seek a conception of valuing that is more tempting as a ground of value I think we should look to conative, not truth-assessable, favorings such as liking, loving, wanting, or desiring. It sounds more plausible to say that chocolate ice cream is better for me, other things equal, than vanilla because I like it better, rather than because I believe it is better for me. So I think subjectivists should be searching for a conative attitude to play the value grounding role.

Often subjectivists maintain that the authoritative conative favoring attitudes are those that are factually informed, or at least not factually misinformed, about their object. My desire for that drink over there, which I reasonably believe is a gin and tonic but is in fact a petrol and tonic, seems to mislead me about what I have good reason to do. Thus many subjectivists are tempted to idealize the desires granted normative authority.[[3]](#footnote-3)

A common subjectivist method of idealizing is to focus on the relevant valuing attitudes the agent would have after she was fully appreciative of what the option in question, or all options, would be like for her, in addition to requiring that the agent be fully factually informed.[[4]](#footnote-4) But to remain a subjectivist view, this idealization needs to be procedural rather than substantive. This notion of procedural idealization is not trivial to explicate and perhaps not fully understood.[[5]](#footnote-5)

A straightforwardly substantive idealization would require that one desires those things that are worthy of desire regardless of our subjective motivational state. And a straightforward procedural idealization would require that one’s preferences be, for example, internally coherent, or based on accurate forecasts of what the option would in fact be like.[[6]](#footnote-6) A proper procedural idealization should not directly rule out the possibility of any particular option being the object of the idealized valuing attitude.

The intuitive idea is that a procedural account of idealization will not presuppose, and build this presupposition into the content of the idealization, that certain goods are worthier of the idealized valuing attitude than others. But saying only so much would have it that a view that privileged one’s desires on Tuesday, while wearing a hat, or when on heroin would still count as relevantly procedural. Such views continue to look procedural in the sense that they do not presuppose that certain objects are worthier of the favoring attitudes than others. Yet these sorts of idealizations seem arbitrary in that they seem to not plausibly help capture the agent’s own evaluative point of view.

The sort of procedural idealization our subjectivist has in mind aspires to plausibly explicate and reveal the agent’s genuine concerns, not randomly privilege a class of concerns that does not especially reflect the agent’s real evaluative perspective. For example, my own favored type of idealization will privilege favoring attitudes that are responsive to their object as it really is rather than as it is falsely imagined to be. Such attitudes quite plausibly are getting at what the agent really cares about when they accurately understand the object of their concern. But that is not to say that all agents will agree that this method of idealization gets at their true concerns. Subjectivists do not suppose that agents are infallible about the epistemology of their own genuine concerns. Rather, they must claim, the procedure is in fact well designed to get at the agent’s genuine concerns.

Some have complained about such “full information” subjectivist views that they require stuffing a single head full of quite different sorts of lives and that there can be interaction effects which make it impossible to simultaneously appreciate what it would be like to live all the different sort of lives I might live.[[7]](#footnote-7) Partly in response to such worries, other subjectivist views strive to avoid the need to stuff a single head full of what it would be like to live wildly different sorts of lives. They think it is enough to know the extent to which one desires are satisfied in a life, and to know the intensity of the satisfied and unsatisfied desires in a life, to know how well it has gone and to be able to compare how well it has gone to other lives one might have had.[[8]](#footnote-8) Such views, like Benthamite Hedonism, maintain that the value of a life is “isolatable” and can be determined non-comparatively whereas the more traditional full-information views suggest the normatively privileged attitudes are comparative between different ways one’s life might go.

But, and this is the important bit, both sides agree that the relevant favoring conative attitudes are accurately informed about their object. Subjectivists should focus, in one way or another, on desires of this sort.

Partners in Crime?

Initially I said that subjectivists are those who accept the direction of explanation in the *Euthyphro* Dilemma that starts with attitudes. It would be more accurate to say that subjectivists are amongst those that champion the attitude first direction of explanation. Others, such as Kantians and Humean Constructivists, perhaps are best understood as doing so as well. Julia Markovits, Sharon Street, for example, share the subjectivist’s main premises that value originates in value originates in our attitudes.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Some Kantian views can be reasonably thought of as subjectivists who are persuaded that the procedurally ideal concerns of all possible agents will converge in a way such that all have decisive reason to be moral.[[10]](#footnote-10) Such people think there is a non-moral mistake involved in immorality, such that even if we do not presuppose moral facts, procedurally excellent thinking will eliminate the desire to be immoral. Aside from issues I find with particular arguments to this conclusion, I find this view rather unlikely. Wouldn’t it be quite surprising if necessarily there was incoherence or non-aesthetic mistakes involved in actions that produced aesthetically ugly things? Immorality seems mean and selfish not necessarily incoherent and self-contradictory.

Why Subjectivism?

So much for what the view is, how to start putting it in its more plausible form, and who else might share such a view. Why should anyone believe it? I think the subjectivist should adopt at least a three-part strategy to motivate and defend subjectivism. Other components might be added. These possible additions will be discussed below. But I think without at least these three the view would not have a hope of being tolerably convincing. I will first outline the three phases and then offer some guidance about how I think the subjectivist should try to fill in each part.

In the first part the subjectivist is on offense. Here she makes a case that there are contexts where subjectivism seems the most plausible theory. The view must show some areas or contexts where it has important advantages over rivals and that there are clear paradigmatic cases of reasons that are most plausibly determined by what we value. If there were never contexts where subjectivism had advantages over its rivals, why on earth would we accept it? So the subjectivist must point to cases where subjectivism looks like the most plausible approach. Ideally, they would make a convincing case that it is difficult to deny subjectivism this thin end of the wedge. Matters of mere taste, we will see, plausibly provide this sort of home ground for the subjectivist where their analysis is most tempting and difficult to resist.

In the next two parts the subjectivist is on defense. In the second phase of her argument she must confront non-moral cases where subjectivism seems intuitively implausible. Candidate cases of this sort are Parfit’s example of someone who lacks any current motivation, even after procedurally ideal deliberation, to avoid future agony, Rawls’s case of someone who wants to count blades of grass, or Gibbard’s example of an ideally coherent anorexic who cannot stand being plump enough to sustain life. Sharron Street calls these characters “ideally coherent eccentrics.”[[11]](#footnote-11) These eccentrics are meant to highlight that there are cases where it seems we can rule out certain normative conclusions regardless of what the agent’s motivational set looks like. If so, the direction that these eccentrics favoring attitudes point will not be normatively tempting. These cases put pressure on the ability of the subjectivist to extend her model beyond matters of mere taste.

Unlike in matters of mere taste, these cases suggest that there are attitude-independent constraints on what has value or is worth doing. If that were so, the range of cases where our attitudes determine what has value for us and what it makes sense to do would be severely constrained. The argument here against the subjectivist is in some ways similar to the argument in the *Euthyphro*. The thought is that there is a right answer in the cases being pointed to and the correctness of that answer seems stable regardless of how we imagine the relevant attitude pointing. In this second phase the subjectivist must convincingly respond to such cases and persuade us either that subjectivism can get the intuitive results or explain why the intuitions in such cases are less probative than might have been thought.

Finally, in the third phase, the subjectivist must confront the case of morality. What is morally required of an agent seems paradigmatically to not be determined by that agent’s concerns, yet to be normatively authoritative over her. Subjectivists cannot allow that both are the case. Thus I think subjectivism is at least to this extent counter-intuitive and has some real explaining to do to earn our allegiance. Yet there are, I believe, a variety of considerations that can alleviate the pressure from morality on subjective accounts.

Other philosophers have defended subjectivism adding a fourth phase: maintaining that subjectivism has epistemological and metaphysical advantages over its rivals. Typically the thought is that subjectivism is better positioned to take advantage of the benefits of naturalism than its rivals. I won’t pursue this strategy. Some of subjectivism’s rivals have a solid claim to be compatible with naturalism.[[12]](#footnote-12) So this strategy would still need to vindicate subjectivism over its naturalistic rivals and that, I maintain, would require something like the 3-step program I outline. So this fourth step could not substitute for what I have outlined.

Other views, such as Parfit and Scanlon’s version of non-naturalism, are compatible with subjectivism about what grounds reasons even while being non-naturalist about what the reasons relation is. To be clear, Parfit and Scanlon both argue strongly against subjectivism. But as I read them no part of that argument is their non-naturalism. Parfit is clear that even if you accept his sort of non-naturalism, subjectivism is still not ruled out. Subjectivism as I conceive of it is entirely compatible with non-naturalism at the meta-normative level. I find subjectivism clearly more tempting as an account of what grounds reasons than as an account of what the reason relation is. Parfit and Scanlon rightly insist that until one has shown that what the reason relation is turns out to be nothing over and above some naturalistic state, one has not yet fully naturalized one’s worldview. And thus even if we accept subjectivism about what grounds reasons, work remains to ensure a fully naturalistic view.

I have not found a route from considerations in favor of naturalism to a compelling case for subjectivism. But I also do not mean to assert that others who find such a case are mistaken. Let me plead division of labor here and not take a stand on the merits of such an additional component in helping to justify subjectivism. I will voice my suspicion, however, that such considerations have been generally overrated as justifications for subjectivism. However, the main point for now is that one need not reject non-naturalism to embrace subjectivism. Our central question is if, for example, one has a reason to eat chocolate ice cream because one has contingent conative favoring attitudes towards chocolate, and, if so, how generally it is the case that our contingent favoring attitudes ground reasons in this way. Our central question here does not concern whether naturalism is true.

The core thought behind subjectivism can remain whether we are naturalists or not. The core thought is that valuers generate value with their valuing. The direction of explanation goes from valuing to value rather than the reverse. That can be true whether we accept naturalism or not. Thus as I see it issues surrounding naturalism, epistemic worries, metaphysical worries, and whether subjectivists are identifying desire-satisfaction with what the reason relation is are possible additions to the core of subjectivism, but not part of that core.

Bernard Williams famously made a case that reasons must be capable of motivating, at least after proper deliberation. And since only desires can motivate, what one desires after proper deliberation must constrain what we have reason to do. But I think there are reasons that need not be capable of playing this sort of motivational role. Thus I think this alleged short cut to subjectivism’s neighborhood inadvisable.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The Thin End of the Wedge for the Subjectivist

Home turf for subjectivism, I submit, are matters of mere taste where we think there is not a compelling stance-independent one-size fits all answer for all.[[14]](#footnote-14) If one happens to like flannel jammies more than cotton jammies, chocolate ice cream more than vanilla, or is more amused by David Chappell than Chris Rock, assuming one is fully and accurately aware of the non-evaluative features of these options, then I think it fairly clear one has a reason to go with the option one so favors over the option one does not and that this is made the case by the existence of this favoring attitude. Matters of mere taste seem, intuitively, to be cases where what matters to one really matters. Here, if anywhere, the road from valuing to value seems secure.

Peter Railton, in a famous passage, wrote:

Is it true that all normative judgments must find an internal resonance in those to whom they are applied? While I do not find this thesis convincing as a claim about all species of normative assessment, it does seem to me to capture an important feature of the concept of intrinsic value to say that what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone’s good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him.[[15]](#footnote-15)

While I find Railton’s words ultimately compelling, as a premise in a philosophical argument I think one could reasonably complain that this was not common ground, that there were quite common intuitions that told against it, and that it was question-begging against a quite wide range of reasonable views.

But there is a scaled down version of Railton’s claim that it is much less plausible to resist and that can more reasonably be treated as a compelling premise. There is, I maintain, a component of well-being (and normative reasons) that must find this internal resonance with the person whose well-being or reasons it is. In matters of mere taste, such as choosing between patterns of dress or music or gustatory sensations, where intuitively we are choosing something because it is pleasing to ourselves rather than for other reasons, such resonance is critical to which such options benefit us. In such contexts, if it is to benefit me, options must resonate with me. I must in some sense favor or like it, at least if rational and aware. Call this the Minimal Resonance Constraint.

And, while I do think the Minimal Resonance Constraint is crazy intuitive, there are those that deny it. But this denial is not justified by bringing forward cases where intuitively our attitudes do not seem to ground reasons in the domain of matters of mere taste. It remains, I submit, highly intuitive that our attitudes ground our reasons in that domain. Instead, broadly speaking, the denial is motivated by finding cases outside of the realm of matters of mere taste in which the attitudes seem to lack authority and assuming that if attitudes lack authority in those contexts they must also lack authority in matters of mere taste. But this crucial assumption, while warranted if the opponent were a full-blown subjectivist, is not warranted against the defender of the Minimal Resonance Constraint. Such cases must eventually be confronted by the subjectivist but they properly belong in the second and third stage, not this first one. Further, I maintain that when you kick the tires of the stance-independent attempts to capture our reasons in matters of mere taste, you notice that the problem they keep running into is a failure to heed our minimal resonance constraint (or to unconvincingly and without explanation try to mimic it). And, dear reader, I put it to you that you find that lack of resonance, at least in the context of matters of mere taste, unacceptable.

So, subjectivism has home turf. There is a range of paradigmatic and obvious reasons that it handles better than its rivals. That is a decent start on showing the view to be plausible but it is only a start.

Agony, Blades of Grass, and All That

It seems possible to value things that are valueless and to fail to value valuable things. Some have offered cases that purport to show that this situation can remain even after procedurally excellent deliberation. In the former category, we might remind ourselves of Parfit’s example of a person who lacks any concern to avoid future agony or Rawls’s example of a person who wants to count blades of grass. We think a person’s future agony well worth avoiding, even if she does not now care about avoiding this agony after ideal procedural deliberation. We think counting blades of grass a waste of time and pointless. But the subjectivist says that whatever a person cares about in the right way makes what she so values valuable for her. In examples of this sort the subjectivist is put on the defensive to explain why their view is not just defeated by such examples. In these cases, it feels like there are standards for what is valuable or disvaluable that is not hostage to what a person values even after procedurally ideal deliberation. Here I will briefly try to outline only how I think the subjectivist should respond to Parfit’s version of this worry. The other examples would need independent treatment.

Parfit argues that we necessarily have reasons to avoid our own future agony. But seemingly one might fail to care now, even after ideal procedural deliberation, to avoid this future agony. Parfit admits that when one is experiencing the agony, one will necessarily mind it. But it does not follow, Parfit maintains, that a person must now care to avoid, even after ideal procedural deliberation, the future agony that one will later mind. Thus the issue for Parfit involves the subjectivist being unable to vindicate the transfer of reasons we are confident exists between the reasons one will have later to get out of agony to reasons one has now to avoid it.

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. 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. In actual cases, the problem is usually that the future pain is, as Sidgwick put it, “foreseen but not fore felt”.[[16]](#footnote-16) 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.

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. 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 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, “Subjectivists cannot claim that, if we were procedurally rational we would want to avoid all future agony.”[[17]](#footnote-17) I dispute this.

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 stance-independent reason. 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?

Thus I conclude that it is entirely open to the subjectivist to maintain that ideal procedural deliberation involves, among other things, caring about the future cares one will have after later ideal procedural deliberation. If this is so, the subjectivist can account for our necessarily having reasons to avoid future agony in an entirely natural way.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Julia Markovits offers a different reply to Parfit’s worry. She thinks that all agents, after ideal procedural deliberation, will have concerns that give them decisive reasons to be moral in all contexts. Markovits maintains that this apparently non-moral case about one’s own future agony can be satisfactorily handled as a moral case. She maintains that since it would be immoral to pay no attention to one’s own future agony, procedurally idealized agents will not be indifferent to such agony.[[19]](#footnote-19) But of course this reply is only as good as the argument to the conclusion that all must care about morality after procedurally excellent deliberation.

Even if Parfit’s Agony Argument can be accommodated by the subjectivist, that would obviously only be the start of a successful defense at this second stage. What I hope to have gestured towards here is how the subjectivist can get started in replying at this stage. But I admit more work needs to be done here.

Much of the job will involve getting much clearer about the alleged counter-examples and fleshing them out more fully. We must keep in mind, for example, that in the grass counting case the agent fully understands exactly what all her options would be like, and yet prefers counting blades of grass. This is quite different from a case where the agent wants to count blades of grass but when exposed to a life filled with friends and more meaningful activity, finds these latter sorts of activities more rewarding. Our agent never regrets her choice of counting blades of grass, even when vividly confronted with accurate understandings of what the alternatives would have been like. Those sort[s] of additions make me think it less clear that it really would be best for her to avoid counting blades of grass and return to the cocktail party. Rarely, I think, do people have in mind all the features that would be required to make the case a genuine problem for subjectivism. Nonetheless, I admit more needs to be said at this stage to fully defend the subjectivist view.

Reasons to be Moral

To my mind the most compelling case against subjectivism flows from the thought that morality provides everyone with some significant reason to obey even if a person lacks any contingent concerns that would be furthered if they obey. That is just to repeat the often-made observation that morality is categorical rather than hypothetical and one cannot escape the force of the moral requirement simply by failing to care about it.

It seems that everyone has a significant reason to not, for example, abuse the vulnerable—say steal the gloves and shoes of a homeless person on a very cold night. But subjectivism cannot ensure such a verdict and so, the argument under consideration here goes, we should reject subjectivism. Call this the Amoralism Objection against subjectivism.

Some subjectivists resist the claim that they are in the pickle I describe. Mark Schroeder holds out real hope that even within a subjectivist framework all agents will necessarily have most reason to be moral.[[20]](#footnote-20) Thus his subjectivist view, he thinks, might generate results similar to those the Kantian expects. In Schroeder’s case this hope is tied to maintaining that the weight of reasons is not directly responsive to the strength of desire or the degree to which an action promotes something we desire.[[21]](#footnote-21)

I think the subjectivist does have to deal with possible worlds where procedurally idealized agents lack decisive reason to be moral. But I think the subjectivist has a surprisingly compelling explanation for our intuitions about such cases that is compatible with subjectivism. I cannot outline the whole story here but I can provide a taste. Consider first that a great many people, most polls suggest over 95 percent in the US, think there is at least a decent chance that God exists and that the quality of one’s afterlife is positively affected by the moral acceptability of one’s life. If this were true, one would have extremely powerful subjective reasons to live a moral life. As Pascal’s Wager showed us, all it takes is the belief that being good on earth has at least a tiny probability of making our afterlife better than it would have been than if we had been bad, to make it rational to invest substantially in avoiding that extra chance of a bad eternity. If most people think being good on earth improves one’s prospects after one’s death, yet this claim is false, we would have a strong debunking explanation for why so many find it intuitive that one has a strong reason to be moral regardless of one’s concerns.

Second, as demonstrated by Plato’s example of the Ring of Gyges, there are many robust reasons to be moral for those of us that lack the ring that have to do with serving our concerns. Detected immorality has a strong and not very coincidental tendency to harm one’s prospects whether by resulting in being incarcerated or just shunned from the benefits of mutual cooperation and friendship.

Third, most people would significantly prefer to get the goods that tempt them towards immorality without harming others. Being forced to harm innocent strangers, for example, is, by the lights of the vast majority of people’s concerns, a cost. Most people resonate in common with humanity and do not intrinsically want to harm many others. This would ground some reason to avoid immorality. One might claim that it would not ground a decisive reason to be moral. That is true, but it is not at all clear to me that common sense supports the existence of such in all cases. I think commonsense suggests that all have a significant reason to obey morality but does not insist that all always have decisive reasons to obey. The considerations put on the table would go a very long way to explaining in a subjectivist friendly way the existence of such an intuition.

Fourth, the subjectivist can allow that all necessary ought to be moral, when the ‘ought’ is given a moral reading. What the subjectivist denies is that necessarily all ought to be moral when the ‘ought’ is given a rational or reasons reading. This ambiguity can help explain why it seems intuitive to say that all necessarily ought to be moral.

Fifth, there is a powerful lore that evil does not pay. That is, in the words of our amazing local graffiti artist, the bullets you send will meet you in the end. This lore has many legitimate sources, such as some of what I mention above, and seems true enough to make the parental policy of teaching one’s children to be nice and share their toys make good sense. But this lore is propagated via stories beyond what I think most would agree is true. We rarely tolerate in our more popular fiction evildoers who do not get their comeuppance in the end. This is especially true of stories designed for younger, more impressionable minds. We insist that children be taught that evil does not pay and highlight the (literal) ugliness and folly of such behavior. This encourages the conflation of the thought that there is enough truth in such stories to matter and reasonably to guide parents in how to raise their children with the unlikely idea that evil cannot pay.

I could go on in this vein.[[22]](#footnote-22) But enough has been said to hint at how the subjectivist can perhaps convincingly respond to the Amoralism Objection. Broadly, we should be unsurprised if we have to give up some aspects of common sense in coming up with the most plausible general theory of reasons for action. The intuitive costs of accepting subjectivism stemming from the Amoralism Objection, I have offered some reason to think, are not as dramatic as they initially seemed. It is surprisingly plausible that we can explain the appearance of categorical reasons to be decent by appealing to a combination of very, very robust hypothetical reasons to do so and mistaken beliefs. And there are significant considerations in favor of subjectivism that plausibly can go some way towards outweighing what intuitive costs remain from the Amoralism Objection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in my view most of the case for subjectivism has to hinge on showing three things. First the subjectivist must persuade us that there is a range of cases that subjectivism handles more convincingly than its rivals. I think the realm of matters of mere taste is the most fertile ground for the subjectivist here and I argue here and elsewhere it is quite fertile. Next, any defense of subjectivism should acknowledge that there are a range of cases in which it seems that even procedurally idealized conative attitudes seem like they can hit on the wrong answer. This has been alleged to happen both inside and outside the realm of morality. And the subjectivist’s attempt to blunt the force of such alleged counterexamples in these two realms constitute what I think of as the second and third arena in which the subjectivist must successfully duke it out with its rivals to adequately defend their view. Often the starting point for the subjectivist’s response in these latter two arenas will be to suggest that as a result of almost all actual people robustly having various concerns, we get fooled into ruling out anyone having intrinsic reasons to, for example, eat feces. We tend to not waste our time thinking very hard or seriously about what life would be like for a person with wildly unfamiliar sorts of concerns or what such a person would have reason to do. I am optimistic that moves of this sort will prove ultimately compelling in blunting the force of the cases alleged to be counterexamples to subjectivism both inside and outside the realm of morality. Finally, it must be remembered that subjectivism’s rivals often bump up awkwardly against our intuitions as well and have other difficulties. We ought not fixate on the blemishes on subjectivism and hastily reject the view for we may find that our other options are even more bruised.

1. Thanks to Ruth Chang and Kurt Sylvan for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. But see Dale Dorsey, “Subjectivism Without Desire,” *Philosophical Review*, 2012, vol. 121, no. 3, p. 407-442 and Sharon Street, “How to be a Relativist about Normativity,” manuscript. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Desire” here is a term of art that is meant as a general term for conative favorings, not a specific version of such favorings. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The great line of early developers (I do not claim, in each case, champions) of such views, which to my mind include Hume, Mill, and Sidgwick, among others, all idealized the desires thought to be normatively relevant. See Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 111–12; Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (New York: Prometheus, 1979), 10, 113, 329; John Harsanyi, “Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior,” in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, ed. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 55; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1971), 407–24; Richard Hare, *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 101–5 and 214–16. See also Douglas Senor, N. Fotion, and Richard Hare, eds., *Hare and Critics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 217–18; Peter Railton, “Facts and Values,” *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986): 5–29; David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), chap. 2; James Griffin, *Well-Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 11–17; and Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 283–91. Comparable accounts of practical reasons have been influentially championed by (albeit sometimes in a Kantian rather than Humean spirit) Bernard Williams, “Internal and External Reasons,” in his *Moral Luck* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 101–13; Stephen Darwall, *Impartial Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), pt. 2; David Lewis, “Dispositional Theories of Value,” suppl. ser., *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 63 (1989): 113–37; Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); and Julia Markovits, Moral Reason, Oxford University Press, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, Brad Hooker and Bart Streumer, “Procedural and Substantive Practical Rationality,” in the *Oxford Handbook of Practical Rationality*, edited by Alfred Mele and Piers Rawling, Oxford University Press, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The right of subjectivists to appeal to idealized desires has increasingly been challenged. I reply to such worries in my “Subjectivism and Idealization,” in my *From Valuing to Value*, Oxford University Press, 2016. For the challenge see David Enoch, “Why Idealize?”, *Ethics*, 2005, p. 759-87, Arthur Ripstein, “Preference,” Practical Rationality and Preference, ed. Christopher W. Morris and Arthur Ripstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 37–55; H. L. Lillehammer, “Revisionary Dispositionalism and Practical Reason,” *Journal of Ethics* 4 (2000): 173–90; Elijah Millgram, “Mill’s Proof of the Principle of Utility,” *Ethics* 110 (2000): 282–310, esp. 304–6; and, in explicit agreement with Enoch, Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, vol. 1, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Velleman, “Brandt’s Definition of ‘Good’,” *Philosophical Review*, 1988; Sobel, “Full Information Accounts of Well-Being,” in my *From Valuing to Value*, Rosati, “Persons, Perspectives, and Full Information Accounts of Personal Good,” *Ethics*, 1995; Loeb, “Full Information Theories of Individual Good,” *Social Theory and Practice*, 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Heathwood, “The Problem of Defective Desires,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 2005; Lin, “Why Subjectivists about Welfare Needen’t Idealize,” manuscript. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Street, “In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally Coherent Eccentrics and the Contingency of What Matters,” *Philosophical Issues*, Vol. 19, issue 1, (Oct. 2009), and Markovits, *Moral Reason*, Oxford University Press, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*. I offer reasons to doubt such convergence in my “Do the Desires of Rational Agents Converge?” in my *From Valuing to Value*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Street, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For example, Foot, *Natural Goodness* and Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*. For the response I think a subjectivist should give to such proposals see David Copp and my “Morality and Virtue,” in my *From Valuing to Value*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Robert Johnson’s “Internal Reasons and the Conditional Fallacy,” *Philosophical*

    *Quarterly*, 49 (194), 1999, p. 53-71 and my “Internalism, Explanation, and Reasons for Action in my *From Valuing to Value*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I make this case much more fully in my “The Case for Stance-Dependent Value,” (manuscript). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Railton, “Facts and Values,” in his *Facts, Values, and Norms* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Sidgwick, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Parfit, ibid., p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I argue for this conclusion more fully in my “Parfit’s Case Against Subjectivism,” in my *From Valuing to Value*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Markovits, Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions*, Oxford University Press, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. I take issue with Schroeder’s arguments to this position in my “Subjectivism and Proportionalism”, in my *From Valuing to Value*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. And indeed I do in my “Subjectivism and Reasons to be Moral,” in *From Valuing to Value*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)