

Reasons without value?

- *Value-based vs. desire-based theories of normative practical reasons*

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I. Introduction

There are two main types of view about *normative practical reasons*; *objectivist* and *subjectivist* views.^{1 2} According to objectivist views, our practical reasons are provided by facts about *value*; about what makes things objectively *good* or *right*.³ Objectivist views can also be called *value-based* views about reasons since, on such views, reasons depend on value in some way.⁴ Hence, the validity of an objectivist theory of reasons depends on the validity of an objectivist theory of value.

According to subjectivist views, on the other hand, practical reasons are instead provided by facts about *the agent* (whose reasons they are); about what would fulfil his or her present desires or wants, satisfy his or her preferences, or achieve his or her present goals or aims. These views are often called *desire-based* views about reasons.⁵ These views do not depend for their validity on any theory of value.

¹ Parfit, Derek. On What Matters. (ms draft of 28 April 2008). (pp 44-45). It is, of course, also possible to be a *nihilist* about practical reasons but I'm ignoring that possibility for now.

² The distinction between objectivism and subjectivism about reasons is often conflated with the distinction between *externalism* and *internalism* about reasons, but these distinctions are not quite the same. While reasons internalism only needs to specify a necessary condition on normative reasons, objectivism and subjectivism concern the metaphysical grounds of normative reasons – what *provides* or *grounds* reasons. I will mention externalism and internalism only where it is relevant. For more on this, see Bernard Williams' "*Internal And External Reasons*" in *Moral Luck* (1981) and Jonathan Dancy's discussion in Ch. 2 of his *Practical Reality* (2000).

³ In Parfit's words, our practical reasons are provided by facts about what "*make[s] certain outcomes worth producing or preventing, or make[s] certain things worth doing for their own sake*". (p 44). Parfit defends a *teleological* version of the objectivist view, but there are also *deontological* versions of objectivism. The former focuses on what is objectively good or bad (or better or worse) while the latter focuses on what is objectively right or wrong.

⁴ That reasons depend on value in some way is by Joseph Raz called "the classical approach" as it has its origins in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. On this approach, reasons are "*explained in part by invoking value: valuable aspects of the world constitute reasons.*" He further says that this approach "*can be characterized as holding that [...] reasons are facts in virtue of which [intentional] actions are good in some respect and to some degree*". Raz, Joseph. "*Agency, Reason, And The Good*" in *Engaging Reason* (2002). (pp 22-23). Contemporary defenders of this classical/value-based approach include Raz, Parfit, and Thomas Scanlon. On Parfit's and Scanlon's value-based views, it is not the case that value *constitutes* or provides reasons *directly*; rather, reasons are provided by *facts* about what makes things valuable. 'Goodness' is then understood as "*the property of having other properties that might give us certain reasons*". Parfit. (ms 2008). (p 39). Hence, on their view, reasons depend on value and 'value' is in turn analyzed in terms of 'reasons'. This is known as the "buck-passing" version of the value-based view.

⁵ Parfit. (ms 2008). (p 44). More correctly, the desire-based view is only one type of subjectivist view. Other subjectivist views mentioned by Parfit are *aim-based* and *choice-based* views (see also footnote 7). Other alternatives could perhaps be *preference-based* or *want-based* views. However, the differences between these

Parfit also uses the terms *subject-given* and *object-given* reasons.⁶ While subject-given reasons are provided by our desires (or by some other subjective element of the agent⁷), object-given reasons depend instead on *the objects* of these desires, or rather on the facts that make these objects⁸ valuable. Subject-given reasons thus depend on *that* we want something, while object-given reasons depend on (the objective value of) *what* it is that we want; or rather, what we *should* want.⁹ Subjectivism holds that there are *no* object-given reasons¹⁰ while objectivism holds that *all* reasons are object-given.¹¹ Thus, when the subjectivist claims that it is the fact that we want a certain outcome that gives us a reason to try to bring it about, he or she is talking about *subject-given* reasons. And when the objectivist claims that it is the facts that make a certain outcome objectively valuable that give us (everyone?¹²) a reason both to want this outcome and to try to bring it about, he is talking about *object-given* reasons.

As an aside, it could be mentioned that the terms ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ are sometimes used to draw a completely different distinction among reasons that concerns the beliefs of the agent (whose reasons are under consideration). It is important not to confuse this distinction with the one between object-given and subject-given reasons. One way to draw this other distinction concerning beliefs is to talk about the objective and the subjective *senses* of the word ‘reason’.¹³ Thus, on subjectivism (the view that there are only subject-given reasons), we have (subject-given) reasons in the *subjective sense* and (subject-given) reasons in the *objective sense*. In the former sense our reasons depend on our beliefs, while in the latter sense our reasons are independent of our beliefs.¹⁴

different subjectivist views will not be very important in the present context. I will henceforth speak mostly of ‘desire-based views’ and ‘subjectivist views’ and I will use these names interchangeably, leaving it open exactly how ‘desire’ should be understood.

⁶ Parfit. (ms 2008). (pp 44-45).

⁷ On a *desire-based* view it is our *desires*, on an *aim-based* view it is our *aims*, on a *preference-based* view it is our *preferences*, etc. Like Parfit, I will concentrate on the desire-based views but I will often speak broadly of what a person *wants*, *prefers* or *cares about* or what *matters to* a person (or *from that person’s perspective*) all of the time referring to the same broad type of subjectivist view.

⁸ The objects in question are plausibly states of affairs or outcomes.

⁹ It should be pointed out that even on pure objectivist views, some of our reasons might depend on our desires. But this would be so only when the satisfaction of the desires in question would be valuable in some way. The reasons, even though they *depend on* desires in this way, are not *provided by* our desires directly, but rather, they are provided by the fact that their satisfaction would somehow be valuable. Thus, such reasons would not be subject-given even though they depend on facts about us having certain desires. Only on subjectivist views (as well as on hybrid views according to which there are both subject-given and object-given reasons) can desires provide reasons directly, independently of considerations of value. I will say more about this later on.

¹⁰ I wish to stress that only *practical* reasons are concerned here. A subjectivist in the present sense must not (indeed, *should not*, I believe) deny that, for example, *epistemic* reasons are object-given.

¹¹ As I mentioned in footnote 9, a hybrid theory on which there are both subject-given and object-given reasons is also possible. Ruth Chang defends such a hybrid theory in her “*Can Desires Provide Reasons For Action?*” in *Reason And Value*. (2004). I will ignore this possibility for now and focus on the pure objectivist and subjectivist theories.

¹² Parfit speaks at one point of “omnipersonal” reasons. He says that “... *many events are impersonally good* [...] *and since everyone has reasons to want such events to occur, such impersonal goodness involves omnipersonal reasons*”. (p 42).

¹³ Mark Schroeder draws this distinction in this way. He says first that “*When context requires, I’ll distinguish by calling this the ‘objective normative’ or ‘objective’ sense of the word ‘reason’*”. (p 12). “*Objective normative reasons, then, depend on how things are independently of the agent’s beliefs* [...] *Subjective normative reasons depend on what the agent believes, independently of how things actually are.*” *Slaves Of The Passions* (2007). (pp 13-14).

¹⁴ However, our beliefs can sometimes be relevant to our (subject-given) reasons in the objective sense. This could be so when some desire of mine takes some belief of mine *as its object*. For example, I might have a desire to believe in the existence of God. If this would be true of me, I might have a (subject-given) reason in the

For better or for worse, we do not always have true beliefs. The standard example¹⁵ is that of a person who wants to have a sip of gin and tonic and falsely believes that the glass in front of her contains gin and tonic. She thus has a (subject-given) reason *in the subjective sense* to reach out for the glass and take a sip. But, unknown to her, the glass in fact contains not gin but petrol. She doesn't want to have a sip of petrol. Thus, she has *no* (subject-given) reason *in the objective sense* to reach out for the glass and take a sip; indeed, she has a reason in that sense *not* to take a sip.¹⁶ More could be said about these different senses of 'reason', but I mention this distinction only to put it aside. Unless where explicitly stated, all further talk of 'objectivism' and 'subjectivism' will refer to the conflicting views about whether normative practical reasons are object-given and based on *value* or subject-given and based on *desire* (broadly conceived).

The subjectivist view about reasons has been subject to much criticism in recent times and even though many consider it the standard¹⁷ or default view, it is presently under heavy attack. Parfit's intention is to reject *all* subjectivist theories, but he concentrates on desire-based views and I will do so also (again, leaving it open exactly how 'desire' should be understood). In the light of arguments provided by Parfit and other objectivists¹⁸, I wish to show that, contrary to the intentions of these writers, the desire-based and the value-based views are *at least* on a par. My strategy is to show how objections against desire-based views fail to establish that there is something of great importance that objectivist, value-based views can, while subjectivist, desire-based views cannot, account for. *In that sense* these views are equally acceptable. In deciding between the two views, then, we will have to turn to *other* considerations (some of which are not discussed at all by many objectivists) such as ontological economy, the relation between reasons and rationality and how well these views fit with plausible substantive moral theories. I suspect that if we take such further considerations into account some subjectivist view will "win", but I will not argue directly for this here.

It is true that objectivist theories can (apparently) account for some things that subjectivist theories cannot account for. But subjectivists can plausibly claim, I argue, that these things cannot and need not be accounted for. One central pillar in Parfit's argument against the subjectivist is his insistence that things matter from an impersonal point of view, or from "the

objective sense to try to cultivate such a belief (but this would plausibly not be a *sufficient* reason for me to try to cultivate a belief in God, and it would *not* imply that I have a reason to *actually* believe in God).

¹⁵ Due to Bernard Williams (1981).

¹⁶ Schroeder uses the same example: "Suppose that Bernie is standing there, holding the glass he believes to contain gin and tonic, and wanting to drink a gin and tonic [...] There is a sense in which he has a reason to take a sip [...] Intuitively, the reason that he has to take a sip is that he believes that his glass contains gin and tonic." (p 13). "[The information that Bernie's glass, unknown to him, contains not gin but petrol] *does not* change our judgement about whether, in the sense presently at issue [i.e. the subjective normative sense], he has a reason to take a sip. After all, we can reasonably expect him to take a sip, we can reasonably criticize his deliberations if he does not take a sip, and if he does take a sip, we can say that he did so for a reason [namely, that he believed that the glass contained gin and tonic]. [There is, however,] another sense – the objective sense – in which there is a reason for Bernie to set the glass down without taking a sip." (pp 12-13).

¹⁷ Some desire-based view is almost universally taken for granted in the social sciences and in economics and practical reasons and rationality are often defined in a desire-based way.

¹⁸ Thomas Scanlon, for example, argues that "*desires almost never provide reasons for action in the way described by the standard model.*" His argument involves the idea that often when it seems as if our desires give us reasons, these reasons are really object-given/value-based reasons with what he calls "subjective conditions". Scanlon, T.M. *What We Owe To Each Other*. (1998). (p 43). I will return to Scanlon's arguments in the next section.

point of view of the universe”.¹⁹ He seems to think that because the subjectivist cannot account for and embrace this idea, we can conclude that desire-based views are “bleak” views on which nothing matters.²⁰ An alternative conclusion would be that the impersonal perspective is not the right kind of perspective to take when we theorize about practical reasons (or about what matters in general). In an essay about the meaning of life, William Grey writes:

“... if nothing matters from a cosmic point of view, the fact that nothing matters from a cosmic point of view does not, from that point of view, matter. We cannot validly infer our cosmic insignificance but only our nonsignificance; that is, we can infer only the irrelevance of such a perspective for considerations of significance, and this does nothing to undermine the fact of significance from our more parochial temporal and spatial perspectives.”²¹

In line with the sentiment of this quote it should be pointed out that even if nothing matters from an impersonal point of view, things certainly matter from a *personal* point of view and that this might be enough for the purpose of finding a plausible theory of practical reasons (and also of prudence).²² Perhaps it is not enough to capture everything that Parfit and other objectivists require of an adequate theory of reasons, but their criteria might be too demanding. Further, things can matter from an *interpersonal* or *social* perspective and that might be enough for the purpose of finding a plausible theory of morality. On some moral theories, for example, morality is not about achieving and maintaining certain impersonally good outcomes, but rather that each person has subject-given, desire-based reasons to act morally or to be a moral person.²³ If such a theory has got it right, this might be enough to understand and justify morality without appeal to any impersonal point of view or any conception of objective value.

Contrary to Parfit, I find the assumption that things matter from an impersonal point of view much less plausible than the opposite assumption. The idea that things matter from an impersonal perspective involves a strong, substantive intuition that is not universally shared and as such invites a demand for further justification. If we can reach an adequate theory of practical reasons, and subsequently of prudence and morality (and perhaps also of “the meaning of life”), without making this assumption, this seems to me preferable.²⁴ But even

¹⁹ The phrase “the point of view of the universe” is taken from Henry Sidgwick from whom Parfit draws much inspiration. See *The Methods Of Ethics* (7th ed. 1907). (p 382).

²⁰ Parfit. (2008). (pp 85-86).

²¹ Grey, William. “*Evolution and the meaning of life*”. (1987). (p 493).

²² Parfit is, of course, aware of this possibility and he says that “*some subjectivists would admit that, on their view, nothing matters in an impersonal sense. It is enough these writers claim, that some things matter to particular people.*” But Parfit provides no response to this subjectivist move, he only says that “*But this reply shows how deep the difference is between the two kinds of theory*” (p 85). Further, Parfit often writes as if for the subjectivist it is a matter of *reluctantly* having to accept that nothing matters in an impersonal sense (in order to save the subjectivist theory?), but many subjectivists find this intuition independently more plausible than the one held by Parfit.

²³ See, for example, David Gauthier’s contractarian account of morality in his *Morals By Agreement* (1986). He says the following about his own kind of theory: “*A contractarian theory of morals, developed as part of the theory of rational choice, has evident strengths. It enables us to demonstrate the rationality of impartial constraints on the pursuit of individual interest to persons who may take no interest in others’ interests. Morality is thus given a sure grounding in a weak and widely accepted conception of practical rationality.*” (p 17). By ‘interest’, Gauthier means the relation of *individual preference* (p 22). [Rawls? Harsanyi?]

²⁴ Scanlon expresses scepticism about this possibility. He says that “*To say that people have reasons not to mistreat others, or reasons to provide for their own future interests, only if doing so promotes the fulfilment of their present desires has seemed to many people to make the requirements of morality and prudence ‘escapable’*

though I think that it should be seen as a weakness rather than a strength of a theory of reasons to have to rely on the substantive intuition that things matter from an impersonal point of view, my arguments will not rely on this opposite assumption. I suggest that subjectivist theories can account for everything *that can and needs to be accounted for* by an adequate theory of practical reasons, or rather, that the arguments intended to show otherwise are far from conclusive. In the absence of a convincing argument to the contrary we still have (at least some) reason to believe that all practical reasons are subject-given and that we thus can have reasons without value.

II. Why (not) subjectivism?

With the ultimate aim of refuting all subjectivist theories of practical reasons, Parfit - as a preliminary to his critique of such theories - offer us as many as ten different possible explanations as to why many people have, on his view *wrongly*, accepted some subjectivist theory. “*How could all these people be so mistaken?*”, he asks.²⁵ As a preliminary to my own discussion, I will review Parfit’s explanations. I do this with the dual aim of further clarifying the main differences between our two rival views and to undermine, or at least weaken, Parfit’s claim that people’s acceptance of subjectivist theories is somehow mistaken. Along the way, I will introduce some further distinctions and terminology that will be useful in my further discussion. I hope to establish here that - as far as the considerations raised in these ten explanations go - these two rival views seem to be on a par, and thus, at least, equally acceptable. Then, in section III, will I discuss Parfit’s and other objectivists’ more direct attempts to refute subjectivist theories. There my aim will be to defend subjectivist theories against various objectivist criticisms.

1). Partial agreement of the two theories

Parfit’s first explanation as to why people have mistakenly accepted some subjectivist theory of reasons concerns the partial agreement, or overlap, that he claims on behalf of the two rival theories. As we have seen, subjectivists focus on the agent’s *wants, desires, preferences, aims*, etc. Parfit begins by saying that “*what we want is often something that is worth doing or achieving.*”²⁶ In such cases, these two kinds of theory agree, since we thus can be said to have *value-based, object-given* reasons to try to fulfil such wants or desires, or achieve such aims.

By ‘being *worth* doing or achieving’, Parfit, of course, means *objectively* worth doing or achieving (and presumably he has his own preferred theory of that in mind, where what’s worth doing or achieving depends on how good it is from an impersonal point of view). So his claim is that what is actually desired is often, but not always, also objectively worth doing or achieving. Whenever this is the case, we have object-given reasons to do, and try to achieve, these things. Thus, the two rival theories sometimes agree on what we have reason to do. Parfit uses the following example to illustrate this agreement. He says that according to all plausible objectivist theories, we have reasons to try to promote our own future well-being.

in a way that they are clearly not.” He also says that “*This way of putting the matter suggests that resistance to the idea that all reasons depend on desires arises from a wish to tell others what they must do and a concern that they should not so easily escape our criticism.*” (pp 41-42). I will return to these kinds of considerations later on.

²⁵ Parfit. (ms 2008). (p 61).

²⁶ Parfit. (ms 2008). (p 61).

Since most of us *want* to promote our own future well-being anyway, subjectivist theories also imply that most of us have reasons to try to promote our own future well-being.²⁷

Parfit thinks that this explains why people have been led to accept subjectivist theories when they should have accepted some objectivist theory instead. I do not see, however, how this, on its own, explains why people have mistakenly accepted subjectivist theories about reasons. Further, this explanation seems to be able to work both ways. Parfit, of course, wants to say that the subjectivist view lends its (apparent) plausibility from the objectivist view, but why not the other way around? It could just as well be the case that a subjectivist view is correct and that it is the proponents of the objectivist views that are mistaken. Nothing about the agreement of the two theories itself excludes that it is the objectivists who have come to accept the wrong view because it often coincides with the correct view. In that sense, the two views seem to be on a par with respect to the agreement alluded to.

Parfit would, of course, add that there are certain *other* things that only objectivist theories can account for. This is true, of course, and I will come to it soon enough. But as far as this first explanation goes, there is, as far as I can see, nothing counting either in favour of or against any of the two rival theories under consideration.

Further, as Parfit would agree, the agreement between the two theories is rather shallow. As I have said, when objectivists claim that we have reasons to promote our own future well-being, they are talking about *value-based, object-given* reasons; it is because (and insofar as) our future well-being is somehow *objectively good* that we have reason to promote it. But when subjectivists claim that we have reasons to promote our future well-being, they are talking about *desire-based, subject-given* reasons; it is because (and insofar as) *we care* about our future well-being that we have reason to promote it.

As Parfit also points out, there are also significant *disagreements* between the two kinds of theory. Even though these theories agree that we have reasons to try to promote many of our present desires and aims, they wholly disagree about our reasons to *have* our desires and aims in the first place. Further, objectivist theories can imply that we have decisive reasons to do something that subjectivist theories imply that we have *no* reason, or even decisive reason *not* to do and vice versa. They also often disagree about how *strong* our reasons are. On many subjectivist theories, the strength of our reasons depends on the strength of our desires, while on objectivist theories the strength of our reasons depends instead on how good, or worth achieving, the fulfilment of these desires would be.²⁸

2.) Confusing reasons with desires

The second explanation concerns a supposed confusion of desires and reasons. As we have seen, Parfit thinks that what we want is often something that is objectively worth doing or achieving, and further that we thus have value-based, object-given reasons to try to fulfil such desires. He now claims that we have such desires for what is objectively good “*because we believe that we have such value-based reasons.*” He says that “*we are often motivated by the belief that some act or outcome would be good*” and when our desires “depend on our

²⁷ Parfit. (ms 2008). (p 45).

²⁸ Parfit. (ms 2008). (p 45).

beliefs” in some way and when we have such value-based, object-given reasons, “*we may fail to distinguish between these desires and these reasons.*”²⁹

That is, people believe that they have value-based, object-given reasons; *because* they believe that they have such value-based, object-given reasons they become motivated to act in accordance with these believed reasons, hence they *want* to act in this way, and then they are mistakenly led to believe that their reasons depend, not on the facts that make these things objectively good or worth doing or achieving, but on the fact that they want these things. In short, it is because people believe in value-based, object-given reasons and that they are motivated accordingly that they are mistakenly led to believe that their reasons are instead desire-based and subject-given; it is because people believe in objectivist theories of what they have reason to do that they thus want to do what they think they have reason to do that, in turn, makes them believe in subjectivist theories.

This explanation gives rise to questions about the precise connection that is claimed between belief and motivation. First, it seems as if the burden of proof lies on the objectivist at this point to show that the motivation depends of the belief in the right kind of way needed for the explanation in question to work. As Bernard Williams points out “*there are various means by which the agent could come to have the motivation and also to believe [that he has a reason], but which are the wrong kind of means to interest [the objectivist]*”.³⁰ Williams considers a person who by some means (in Williams’s case by means of persuasion “by his family’s moving rhetoric”) comes to have both a motivation (i.e. a desire broadly conceived) to act in a certain way and a belief that he has a reason to act in this way. This, Williams claims,

“... excludes an element which [the objectivist] essentially wants, that the agent should acquire the motivation *because* he comes to believe [that he has a reason], and that he should do the latter, moreover, because, in some way, he is considering the matter aright.”³¹

Williams further challenges the objectivist to explain how a belief about reasons appropriately can give rise to a new motivation. If the objectivist answer to that challenge involves, as Williams thinks it has to, some notion of correct rational deliberation, the objectivist would have to say that if only the agent deliberated correctly he would come to be motivated in accordance with the believed reason whatever motivations (i.e. desires) *the agent originally had*. But, if this is the objectivist answer to the challenge, and the deliberation could not start from the agents existing motivations, there seems to be nothing for the agent to deliberate *from*, to reach this new motivation. But if the objectivist would allow that the agent must start his deliberation from his existing motivations, his reason would turn out to be a reason that bears a connection to the agents original desires after all (he has what Williams call an *internal reason*³²).

²⁹ Parfit. (ms 2008). (p 61).

³⁰ Williams (1981). (p 108).

³¹ Williams (1981). (pp 108-109).

³² (Claims about) *internal* reasons are relative to, what Williams call, the agent’s *subjective motivational set* (S), while (claims about) *external* reasons are not. (p 102). According to internalism, roughly, something can be a normative reason for me to act in a certain way only if it is related to what I would want if I knew the relevant facts and deliberated correctly, starting from my present S. Williams speaks of there having to be a ‘sound deliberative route’ from my present S in order for me to have a reason.

Second, if it is presupposed that we can be motivated by beliefs alone, many subjectivists would not be convinced by this explanation. This is so because many subjectivists are Humeans and believe that we cannot be motivated by beliefs; motivation always involves a desire or some other *non-cognitive* element. The objectivist could, of course, explicitly deny, and try to refute, the Humean picture of motivation. Thomas Scanlon says that “*having what is generally called a desire involves a tendency to see something as a reason*” and

“it is not the case that whenever a person is moved to act he or she has a desire [...]: we often do things that we ‘have no desire to do’ in the ordinary sense [...] when a person *does* have a desire [in this “ordinary” sense] and acts accordingly, what supplies the motive for this action is the agent’s perception of some consideration as a reason, not some additional element of ‘desire’.”³³

However, when Humeans claim that motivation always involves a desire, they do not mean desire in this sense. I might indeed be motivated to “drink a glass of foul-tasting medicine” (to use Scanlon’s own example) without having an immediate desire *to drink it*, but this, the Humean would say, is because drinking foul-tasting medicine is plausibly instrumental, and the motivating work is done, not by belief alone, but by a desire for something which drinking this medicine is a mere means of attaining, for example, a desire to recover from some illness or to keep my health.

The issues about motivation presently raised would, of course, require much further discussion and there is a myriad of different positions one could take. However, at this point, I will just state that I agree with Williams that “*there does indeed seem to be great force in Hume’s basic point.*”³⁴ I thus do not find Parfit’s second explanation very convincing. It is surely true that some people believe that they have object-given, value-based reasons to act in various ways and it is also true that they are often motivated to act in these ways. But what is needed in order for the explanation to work is to show that their motivation depends on their beliefs in the right kind of way, and further that beliefs can give rise to motivation in this way, and here the objectivist seemingly runs into trouble.

Finally, the subjectivist seems to be able to produce an explanation that is similar to Parfit’s but, so to speak, runs in the other direction. It starts from the observation that people have various motivations and desires to act in various ways; this can then lead them to believe, *falsely*, that the things they want are somehow objectively valuable and that there is something objectively good about their actions, and, further, that their reasons are thus object-given and value-based when they in fact are subject-given and desire-based. It seems to me that this “reverse” explanation carries *at least* the same amount of plausibility.

3.) Reasons and (personal) value

The third explanation concerns relations between theories of practical reasons and theories of (personal) value or what’s good (for a person). Parfit says that

“Some people accept desire-based theories about [what’s good for a person]. According to such theories, the fulfilment of some of our desires would be in itself

³³ Scanlon. (1998). (pp 40-41). Scanlon focuses too much on the word ‘desire’ and how it is ordinarily understood.

³⁴ Williams. (1981). (p 109).

good for us. If that were true, we would have value-based reasons to fulfil these desires.”³⁵

This is not necessarily so, however. People who hold desire-based views about what’s good for a person and in addition hold that this gives us value-based reasons are not subjectivists about reasons. They accept a *value-based theory of reasons* coupled with a *desire-based theory of value*. Subjectivism about reasons does not rely on any theory of value. There seems to be four different options here as illustrated in the following diagram:

		Reasons	
		Subjectivism	Objectivism
Value	Subjectivism	(1) "Global subjectivism"	(2)
	Objectivism	(3)	(4) "Global objectivism" (Parfit)

Parfit is right that according to option (2), (which is the combination of a *subjectivist theory of value* with an *objectivist theory of reasons*), “we would have value-based reasons to fulfil these desires”. But according to option (1), (a *subjectivist theory of value* combined with a *subjectivist theory of reasons*), we would not. It might be the case that the combination of a value-based view of reasons and some desire-based view of value yields similar, or even identical, results to some subjectivist theory of reasons in terms of *what* we have reason to do. But that seems to be so only if the desire-based view of value in question would take only our *present* desires into account. And even then the adherents of this view would not be subjectivists *about reasons* because they claim that our reasons are *value-based*; that value is then understood in a subjectivist way does not make these people subjectivists *about reasons*.

³⁵ I have substituted the original ‘well-being’ with ‘what’s good for a person’ in this quote from Parfit. This is because I do not think that well-being and personal good is the same thing. I take ‘what’s good for a person’, ‘a person’s good’, ‘personal good’ and ‘personal value’ to mean the same thing. But ‘well-being’ I take to be something different. On a desire-based view of personal value, a person’s well-being is part of that person’s good only insofar as he cares about it. A person’s well-being is then plausibly *part of* what’s good for that person since most of us care about our well-being, but it does not plausibly exhaust it since most of us care about many other things in addition to our own well-being. Many philosophers have believed that the only thing that can be desired on its own account is pleasure (and the avoidance of pain). Like Parfit, I think that this is false. Parfit (ms 2008). (p 44).

Parfit calls reasons to care about our own future well-being *self-interested* reasons.³⁶ Subjectivists about reasons deny the existence of such reasons as, on such views, only our *present* desires give us reasons. On such theories of reasons we have no reason to *care* about (i.e. to desire) our own future well-being (unless these reasons are themselves based on a present desire for something else), we have only reasons to *promote* our own well-being insofar as we *do* care about it. Needless to say, most of us do care about our own future well-being as well as about the well-being of other people, at least those close to us. This fact, insofar as it is a fact, gives us, on a subjectivist view of reasons, reasons to do lots of things, certainly including providing for our own future needs and helping others, etc.

The third explanation does thus not explain how people are mistaken *in accepting* subjectivist theories about reasons. Rather, it would explain how they are mistaken *about their acceptance* of subjectivism, given that they really are objectivists about reasons with a desire-based view of what's good for a person.

Finding a plausible theory of value is something that I will leave aside for now, but it is plausible to assume that subjectivists adhere to option (1) and thus defend subjectivist accounts of *both* reasons and of value (i.e. that they are what I call “global subjectivists”). David Gauthier (whose “*concern is to demonstrate the possibility and the characteristics of a rational morality, given that value is itself subjective and relative*”³⁷) says that “*We might wish to bypass the great questions of value that have exercised Western philosophers from the time of Socrates and the Sophists. But answers to these questions are implicit in the theory of rational choice.*”³⁸ It is doubtful whether such answers really are *implicit* in the theory of rational choice, but because subjectivist theories of value are highly controversial, Gauthier felt that he could not bypass these great questions after all. My purposes are different from Gauthier's, but there seems to be a similar pressure at this point on the subjectivist (adhering to option (1) above) to say a little bit more about how one might be a subjectivist about value. Indeed, it seems to be the case that if subjectivist theories of value turn out to be unacceptable, the case for subjectivist theories of reasons loses much of its force and appeal. Therefore, I too, will discuss these great questions of value in [chapter ??, section ??].

To sum up my discussion of Parfit's third explanation; what Parfit seems to be saying here is that there is a *specific version* (namely, option (2) above) of the objectivist view, a version radically different from Parfit's own (Parfit's theory is a version of option (4)), which has led people to mistakenly accept a subjectivist view about reasons. It is unclear whether this is true, or what an adherent of option (4) would gain from (pointing out) its truth, as neither Parfit nor the subjectivist (who should, I believe, be understood as adhering to option (1)) believes in this “mixed” theory (namely, option (2)). I take the real contenders in this debate to be options (1) and (4); namely, those that I call *global subjectivism* and *global objectivism* respectively.³⁹

4.) Normative reasons and motivating reasons

³⁶ Parfit (ms 2008). (p 40).

³⁷ Gauthier. (1986). (p 59).

³⁸ Gauthier. (1986). (p 21).

³⁹ 'Global' here should not be confused with 'pure'. *Pure* objectivism/subjectivism are views to the effect that there are only object-given or only subject-given reasons.

Subjectivism and objectivism are rival theories of *normative* reasons. The fourth explanation concerns confusions of normative reasons with motivating reasons. Parfit says that

“we can rightly appeal to our desires and aims when we describe our *motivating* reasons, or why we acted as we did. This may lead us to assume that our desires or aims can also give us *normative* reasons. And some of us fail to distinguish these two kinds of reason.”⁴⁰

Parfit is surely right that we should not conflate normative reasons with motivating reasons. Subjectivists and objectivists alike should agree that we sometimes act in ways we did not have (most) reason to act in. Such actions can still be explained, but they are not thereby justified on any plausible theory of practical reasons. Appeals to motivating reasons can be used in *explanations*, while appeals to normative reasons are used in *justifications*. As Jonathan Dancy says

“... if an agent does something extremely silly, we might say he had a motivating reason for doing what he did, but little normative reason. What this means is that we can give a certain sort of explanation for his acting as he did, but we cannot defend it.”⁴¹

However, this talk of motivating reasons and normative reasons

“... should not be taken to suggest that there are two sorts of reason, the sort that motivate and the sort that are good. There are not. There are just two questions that we use the single notion of a reason to answer [...] The first is why someone acted, and the second is the pleonastic one of whether there were any (good) reasons for so acting.”⁴²

By ‘good reason’, Dancy means normative reason. This seems to be close to what Mark Schroeder, who is a subjectivist in the present sense, means, when he claims that motivating reasons do not constitute a “deep ontological category” and denies that they are a subclass of normative reasons.⁴³ The upshot is that when we talk about *motivating* reasons, we are not separating out a further kind of reason, but merely putting the listener in the realm of explanations. And similarly, when we talk about *normative* reasons we put the listener in the realm of justifications.

Parfit might be right that failure to distinguish motivating reasons from normative reasons has led some people to accept subjectivist theories. However, such a failure would not support subjectivism. Both subjectivists and objectivists need to make the distinction. As subjectivists *can* make the distinction as well as the objectivist we have again found nothing that undermines subjectivist views.

5.) Those “special cases” when desires actually do give us reasons

Even on objectivist views our normative reasons depend on our desires in some cases. But these are all claimed to be special cases. Parfit says that “*there is a superficial sense in which*

⁴⁰ Parfit. (ms 2008). (p 61).

⁴¹ Dancy. (2000). (p 2).

⁴² Dancy. (2000). (pp 2-4).

⁴³ Schroeder. (2007). (pp 12-13).

*our desires or aims can be truly claimed to give us normative reasons*⁴⁴ and that this has made people accept some subjectivist theory of reasons when they ought to have accepted some objectivist theory. His example is that I might have a reason to leave some meeting early, because I want to catch a train, or because my aim is to catch this train, and leaving this meeting now is the only way to fulfil this desire, or achieve this aim of mine. This desire-based reason would plausibly be *derivative* on both the objectivist and on the subjectivist view. On the objectivist view, this reason would be derivative because “*this reason’s normative force would derive entirely from the facts that gave me my reasons to want to catch this train, or to have this aim. If I had no reason to want to catch this train, or to have this aim, I would have no reason to leave now.*”⁴⁵ Parfit here introduces the important distinction between *derivative* and *non-derivative* or *primary* reasons and he states that when he claims that no reasons are provided by our desires, he refers to our primary, non-derivative reasons.

It might, however, be argued that a view on which it is allowed that even some of our *primary* reasons depend on desires is still a recognizably objectivist view as long as these are just marginal cases or concern only trivial reasons. Thus, it might be thought that someone who held that my reason to eat a piece of chocolate is dependent on my immediate desire for chocolate could still be an objectivist. Whether this is so depends on two things: on how we define ‘objectivist’ and on the precise nature of the relation that is claimed between the desire (for chocolate) and the reason (to have some). First, we should distinguish between *pure* and *hybrid* theories of reasons. On pure objectivist theories *all* practical reasons are object-given, while on hybrid theories there are both types of reason. Second, we should distinguish between *depending on* and *being provided by* desire.

Even on *pure* objectivist views, some of our reasons might *depend on* our desires but they are not *provided by* these desires. Rather, they are provided by the fact that the satisfaction of the desires in question would be objectively valuable in some way. It might be true, on this view, that if I did not have my desire for chocolate, I would have no reason to eat some. But even though, in this case, my reason depends for its existence on me having this desire, it is not *provided by* my desire directly, but rather, it is provided by the fact that its satisfaction would somehow be valuable. Thus, such a reason would not be subject-given and desire-based even though it depends on facts about me having a certain desire. Anyone who claims that a desire of mine can provide me with a reason directly - independently of considerations of value - is either a hybrid theorist or a pure subjectivist.

Since Parfit is a pure objectivist he only recognizes that desires and aims can provide reasons in the derivative sense. His fifth explanation is, then, that people have been led to believe that *all* reasons are based on desires or aims because they have been generalising from derivative reasons (which might be desire-based even on the pure objectivist view). A similar, but perhaps more plausible, explanation is available to the hybrid theorist. She could say that since some reasons are subject-given and desire-based, people have been led to believe that *all* reasons are based on desires because they have been generalising from these (marginal and/or trivial?) reasons. But the hybrid theorist’s version of the explanation seems to, more so than Parfit’s version, invite the question of why such a generalisation is supposed to be mistaken. There is surely much philosophical appeal in explaining all reasons in the same way (this is most likely also the reason why Parfit is attracted to pure objectivism). Once it has been conceded that *some* reasons are subject-given and desire-based, an argument to the effect

⁴⁴ Parfit. (ms 2008). (p 61).

⁴⁵

that *all* reasons are so based is only natural. The hybrid view therefore seems to be under pressure.

The more fundamental disagreement here is not the one between the pure objectivist and the hybrid theorist, but the one between these two and the subjectivist. The fundamental issue, then, is: “are there any object-given, value-based reasons?”. To this, as we have seen, only the subjectivist answers in the negative and the pure objectivist and the hybrid theorist can thus make common cause against the subjectivist. Indeed, ‘objectivism’ is often used to cover both pure and hybrid theories, that is, all theories that reject pure subjectivism.

We can now return to Parfit’s example concerning having to leave a meeting in order to catch a train. The subjectivist should, I believe, agree with Parfit that my reason to catch this train is plausibly seen as a *derivative* reason. Parfit would say that you can have such a reason because of something else you have a reason for, for which catching the train is a means. The subjectivist should say the same thing. But on the desire-based view this can be so only if catching the train is a means to something else I *want* or *aim for*. This “something else” could be the object of, what Parfit calls a *telic* desire, or it could be the object of yet another *instrumental* desire. The difference between the value-based theory and the desire-based theory is only where this chain of reasons ends. The subjectivist would, of course, say that our *non-derivative, primary* reasons are all based on our telic wants, preferences, desires, etc. – those things we want, aim at or prefer for their own sake. David Hume seems to have had this in mind in the following passage from the *Enquiry*.

“Ask a man why he uses exercise, he will answer, *because he desires to keep his health*. If you then enquire, why he desires health, he will readily reply *because sickness is painful*. If you push your enquiries further, and desire a reason why he hates pain, it is impossible that he can give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object [...] something must be [(un)]desirable on its own account...”⁴⁶

The important part in this context is, of course, the idea of an *ultimate end* - something that terminates the chain of reason giving; something that we aim at on its own account, that is what Parfit calls telic desires as opposed to instrumental desires. As Parfit points out, many people have believed that at the end of all such chains of instrumental desires, as the one in the passage from Hume above, there is some telic desire for pleasure or the avoidance of pain. In the quoted passage it seems that Hume held that view. Regardless of whether Hume held that view or not, I agree with Parfit that this view is false.

Failure to see the importance of the distinction between derivative and non-derivative reasons can indeed lead people the other way as well. That is, from a subjectivist to an objectivist view. If people interpret the desire-based view as saying that you have a reason to catch a certain train *only if* you have an immediate desire to catch this train, this might have led them to abandon this view too hastily. It is, of course, enough that you have *some* desire for which (possibly unknown to you) catching the train is a means. Wanting to catch the train is thus not *necessary* for you to have a reason to try and do so. And while, on many subjectivist views, wanting to catch a train is *sufficient* for you to have a reason to try and do so, it does, of course, not imply that this is what you have *most* or *sufficient* reason to do.

46 Hume, D. “Enquiry”. (p 293). As quoted by Arthur Ripstein in his “Preferences”

6.) Liberalism

Parfit says here that many people accept subjectivist theories about reasons because they are *liberals* who believe that we should not tell other people what they ought to want.⁴⁷ This, I believe, is one of several reasons that make subjectivist theories appealing, but it is unclear what Parfit would say to people who are liberals in this sense. I believe that we should accept this liberal idea that for all moral and political purposes we should take as our starting point what people actually want (or what they *would* want under some idealizing mechanism) and not what they *ought* to want according to some ethical theory. I don't think, however, that this liberal idea *by itself* constitutes a strong reason to accept a subjectivist theory of practical reasons. But as long as we are liberals in this sense, our intuitions seem to give at least some support to subjectivism.

Liberalism *broadly conceived* – as a general moral and political outlook – is, of course, compatible with objectivism as well as with subjectivism. This is so especially if we think that individual liberty or personal autonomy is objectively valuable and that we thus have object-given, value-based reasons to promote or respect these things in some ways, something a subjectivist liberal must deny. Admittedly, the subjectivist liberal would have some explaining to do on that matter! Determining which of our two rival theories fit better with liberalism broadly conceived, or why we should be liberals in this broad sense, would require much further discussion. But I will not here go into such debates. I am content to conclude that subjectivist views seem to fit better with the specific liberal ideal that ethics and politics should not tell people what they should want or prefer but leave this up to the individual's desires or (considered) preferences.

7.) Rationality

Parfit's seventh explanation concerns the relation between reasons and rationality and depends on a distinction between what we *ought rationally to do* and what we *have reason to do*. He says, first, that when we know that some possible act would be the best (or the only) way to achieve some aim of ours, this act might be what we ought rationally to do. When this is so, some people have assumed that there must be a reason for us to act in this way. But, Parfit claims, it is not the case that we must have a reason to do what we ought rationally to do. Parfit mentions two ways in which rationality and reasons can come apart in this way. The first is when the aim in question depends on a false belief. To give an example, let's say that my aim is to jump out of the window and that I have this aim because I believe, *falsely*, that a deadly gas is spreading in the building and that jumping out of the window is the safest and best way to get out. In this case, jumping out of the window is what I ought *rationally* to do. But I have no *reason* to jump out of the window because there is no deadly gas in the building.

Since this reasoning could be accepted by both the objectivist and the subjectivist, it is unclear how this is supposed to explain how people have been led to accept subjectivist theories of reasons. The subjectivist would, of course, point out that my aim to jump out of the window is not a *telic* aim, it is not what I aim at for its own sake. Plausibly, my aim in this case is to stay alive. The reason that I have no reason whatsoever to jump out of the window in this case is,

⁴⁷ Parfit, p 62

then, simply, that doing so would not contribute in any way to keeping me alive. On the contrary, I might risk breaking a leg.

The second way in which what I ought rationally to do and what I have reason to do might come apart is when I have no reason to have the aim in question. Here there might be a difference between the objectivist and the subjectivist views, as on the subjectivist view we have no reasons to *have* our *telic* aims, yet these aims give us reasons to act in various ways. On objectivist views, if I would have no reason to have my aim, I would have no reason to take the best means to achieving this aim. For example, *if*, despite my telic aim to stay alive, I would have no reason to want to stay alive, I would have no reason to jump out of the window even if I believed that this would be the best or the only way to save my life. Still, this difference between the views does not illuminate Parfit's motive behind explanation number seven.

I will give one interpretation of this explanation that requires some further elaboration. Generally, what we ought rationally to do depends on our beliefs, while what we have reason to do is independent of our beliefs. With this the subjectivist can agree. We could add, however, the distinction between reasons in the objective sense and reasons in the subjective sense that I spoke of in the introduction. A subjectivist who accepts this latter distinction between two senses of 'reason' would say that what we ought rationally to do, which depends on our beliefs, is what we have (subject-given) normative reason *in the subjective sense* to do, but what we have (subject-given) normative reason *in the objective sense* to do is independent of our beliefs and is thus the same as what we ought rationally to do *only* when our (relevant) beliefs are true.

On a standard view of rationality⁴⁸, what it is rational to do, or what we ought rationally to do, depends solely on relations between our mental states such as beliefs, intentions and desires. On the subjectivist view, what we have reason to do also depends on mental states; what we have (subject-given) reason to do in the subjective sense depends on both our beliefs and on our desires, while what we have (subject-given) reason to do in the objective sense depends on our desires only, independently of our beliefs. On objectivist views, what we have reason to do is seen as independent of our mental states altogether (except in the sense that some mental states might be seen as the objects (facts about) which provide us with value-based reasons to try to realize or maintain such states). There is thus a much closer connection between reasons and rationality on subjectivist views than on objectivist views.

We could, now, interpret Parfit's seventh explanation as saying that since what we ought rationally to do is dependent on relations between mental states, people have been led to think that what we have reason to do must also be so dependent. This might be part of the explanation for why people have been led to accept subjectivist views, but it remains to be shown why they are *mistaken* in accepting subjectivism.

8.) Hedonic reasons

The last three of Parfit's explanations all involve the notion of a *hedonic reason*. In his eighth explanation Parfit introduces the distinction between desire-based reasons and hedonic reasons. He claims that when people think that we have reasons to fulfil our present desires,

⁴⁸ On Parfit's view, rationality is understood as "responding to reasons". [...] (p ??).

or satisfy our present preferences, they are thinking about desires for future experiences that they believe would be *enjoyed*. When this is true (that is, when such desires really take as their object experiences that would actually be enjoyed in the future), Parfit claims that we have reasons to fulfil such desires or satisfy such preferences. But these reasons are provided by the fact that these future experiences will be enjoyed (and that this enjoyment would be objectively valuable?) and not by the fact that we desire them or prefer them or some such thing.⁴⁹ He provides the following example:

“When children want something that they later don’t enjoy, their parents sometimes say, ‘See! You didn’t *really* want that’. Such claims are false, since these children *did* want these things, and the truth is rather that their desires didn’t give them reasons.”⁵⁰

Parfit is right that the child *did* want the thing in question and what the parents said was *strictly speaking* false. But I think Parfit is mistaken in his interpretation of the parents’ utterance. What the parents mean when they say ‘You didn’t *really* want that’ is plausibly that the child is mistaken about the connection between his or her instrumental desire and her telic desire. If what the child “really” wants in this example is enjoyment and the child wants this for its own sake, and the parents know that what the child wants as a means to this enjoyment will not bring (or is unlikely to bring) such enjoyment, they can truthfully say to the child that ‘you don’t *really* want that!’ meaning something along the lines of ‘this instrumental desire of yours will not fulfil the telic desire you now have for (future) enjoyment’. To give an example, suppose that the child wants a cup of coffee because she thinks that it will give her an enjoyable taste experience or just a new exciting experience. What the child “really” wants in this case is not a cup of coffee, but the experience she thinks having a cup of coffee will bring. If the parents know that the child will not get what she wants from having a cup of coffee they are correct, in a way, to say that the child don’t really want a cup of coffee. And if the child gets a cup of coffee anyway (and it doesn’t bring her the enjoyment she wanted), the parents can truthfully say ‘See! You didn’t *really* want that’.

I think that my explanation of Parfit’s example, involving instrumental and telic desires, is at least as plausible as the one involving hedonic reasons.

9.) Confusing desire-based with hedonic reasons

Explanation number nine concerns a supposed confusion of desire-based with hedonic reasons. In order to dispel that worry we first need to make the distinction more clear. Parfit makes a further distinction here between *likings* (or *dislikings*), on the one hand, and *meta-hedonic desires* to be in conscious states that we like (or to avoid being in states that we dislike), on the other hand. Parfit claims that it is our (dis)liking that makes being in a certain state good (or bad) and that this gives us value-based reasons to try to be in (or to try to avoid being in) such states. Subjectivists believe that it is instead our meta-hedonic desire, (not) to be having sensations that we (dis)like that give us reasons to try to seek or avoid such sensations; it is the fact (and only insofar as it is a fact) that we *want* pleasure or *prefer* pleasure over pain that gives us reasons to seek pleasure and to try to avoid pain. Since most people have strong telic desires for pleasure and the absence of pain, it is easy to believe that

⁴⁹ Parfit. (ms 2008). (p 62).

⁵⁰ Parfit. (ms 2008). (p 62).

it is something about the pleasure and pain itself (or facts about their objective (dis)value) that provides us with reasons, but this, the subjectivist insists, is mistaken.

The idea behind Parfit's ninth explanation is then that people who fail to distinguish between our (dis)likes and our meta-hedonic desires are led to mistakenly believe that it is our desires that give us reasons. I, however, think that this involves a certain amount of objectivist optimism. After having sorted out the confusion between desire-based and hedonic reasons, those who really are subjectivists will continue to claim that it is our desires that give us reasons. Parfit is clearly right that (dis)liking something and wanting (not) to be in this state that we (dis)like is not the same thing, and he is probably also right that some people fail to draw this distinction, but he is wrong in claiming (insofar as he is making such a claim) that - by having made the distinction clear - we reveal some hidden weakness in the subjectivist view that ought to make us all turn to objectivism.

10.) Normative and causal dependence on desires

I have already noted that both subjectivists and objectivists can agree that some of our reasons are such that if we didn't have certain desires, we would not have these reasons. On subjectivist views this is so because our reasons *normatively* depend on our desires, while on objectivist views this might be so in several different ways that involve some *causal* dependence on our desires. Parfit says that some of our reasons might be provided by facts that causally depend on our having certain desires. His first example, again, involves the notion of a hedonic reason: when we have some desire this might cause it to be true that this desire's fulfilment would be *pleasant*. When we, for instance, play games without rewards that involve pure luck, we would have no reason to win. But if we *want* to win, having this desire would make it true that we would *enjoy* winning and *this* fact, Parfit claims, would then give us a reason to try to fulfil this desire. That is, it is not the fact that we *want* to win that gives us a reason to try to win, but rather the fact that we would *enjoy* winning. Our reason would then not be desire-based, but hedonic.

Generally, on Parfit's view, when some act would give me pleasure, this fact gives me a reason to act in this way. That my enjoyment, and thus my reason, *causally* depends on me having a desire should not be confused with, and should not be taken as support for, a desire-based position on which my reason *normatively* depends on me having a desire. The distinctions between hedonic reasons and desire-based reasons and between normative and casual dependence are surely very helpful in making sense of the two main positions we have been discussing and also in pinpointing some of the things that are at stake in the disagreement between them. But it is not clear that it explains why people have accepted subjectivist theories when they ought to have accepted some objectivist theory. As we have seen, the last three explanations have all been relying on the notion of hedonic reasons. Like with self-interested reasons, the subjectivist clearly denies also the existence of hedonic reasons.

Conclusion

[more to be added...]

In the next section I will discuss Parfit's and other objectivists' more direct attempts to refute subjectivist theories. There my main aim will be to defend subjectivist theories against various objectivist criticisms.