A Case against Subjectivism: A Reply to Sobel

Abstract
Subjectivists are committed to the claim that desires provide us with reasons for action. Derek Parfit argues that subjectivists cannot account for the datum that we all have reason to want to avoid future agony, and therefore, subjectivism is false. In response, David Sobel defends subjectivism and argues that subjectivists can account for this datum by appealing to the Reasons Transfer Principle (RTP), the principle that if one will later have a reason to get $X$, then one now has a reason to facilitate the later getting of $X$. Sobel’s defense of subjectivism relies on the use of RTP, however, there is good reason to believe that the subjectivist does not always have reason to appeal to future concerns. I argue that if the subjectivist appeals to RTP, then their theory of subjectivism entails that we can have reasons which do not correspond or even relate to our actual desires. I conclude that there does not exist a “subjectivist-friendly” defense of RTP, and hence, Sobel cannot appeal to RTP without disavowing a core tenet of subjectivism – the claim that our desires are the sole source of reasons.
The question, “What do I have reason to do?”, bears a close relation to the further question, “Why, or in virtue of what, do I have this reason?”. We typically grant that to have a reason entails an explanation or a story for why there exists such a reason. For instance, there is something unsatisfactory about being told that it is just a bare fact that you have a reason to call your grandmother on her birthday. All things equal, it would be more satisfactory to be told that you ought to call your grandmother because it is loving and you have a reason to love her and so forth.

It is hard to deny that we have reasons in some shape or form, and perhaps it is for this reason that the study of reasons is thriving. For once we grant that we have reasons, the door opens to many new questions, such as, What is a reason?; What do I have reason to do?; and What determines, or is the source of, reasons?. Furthermore, our answers to such questions have significant consequences; our answers have the potential to steer and shape the lives of many. Much rides on the study of reasons.

Following in the footsteps of Derek Parfit, let us categorize theories of reasons into two main branches: objectivism about reasons and subjectivism about reasons. Parfit characterizes objectivism as the view that facts about the objects of our desires or aims give us normative reasons for action. For instance, the objectivist might hold that facts about the nature of friendship and our psychology give us reason to pursue friendship. In contrast, subjectivism about reasons is the view that facts about what would satisfy or “fulfill” our desires provide us with normative reasons for action. The subjectivist might hold that the sole fact that I desire to have friends gives me reason to pursue friendships. David Sobel’s characterizes the distinction in a similar fashion. He claims that objectivism is the view that a reason to X is independent of and prior to our stance towards X, and subjectivism is the view that whether we have a reason to X depends on our attitude or stance towards X. Roughly, we may say that objectivists maintain

\[1\] I will refer to “objectivism about reasons (for action)” as “objectivism” for short, and “subjectivism about reasons (for action)” as “subjectivism” for short.

\[2\] [Parfit, 2011], 45.

\[3\] [Parfit, 2011], 45.

\[4\] [Sobel, 2011], 67.
that we have reasons in virtue of things *out in the world*; whereas, subjectivists maintain that whether we have reasons depends on facts about our attitudes.

In this paper, I consider a particular debate between Parfit and Sobel. Parfit argues that if subjectivism is true, then we are left with the conclusion that we cannot account for the datum that “we all have reasons to want to avoid future agony.”\(^5\) So long as reasons depend on our desires and it is possible that we may not have the desire to avoid future agony, it is possible that we do not all have reason to want to avoid future agony. Since subjectivists must accept that there is no guarantee that everyone always has reason to want to avoid future agony, an intuitively plausible reason, subjectivism is an unsuccessful theory of reasons. Parfit calls this the Agony Argument.

In response to Parfit’s attack on subjectivism, David Sobel argues that subjectivists can account for having a reason to want to avoid future agony. The subjectivist can do so by invoking the Reasons Transfer Principle (RTP), the principle that if one will later have a reason to get \(X\), then one now has a reason to facilitate the later getting of \(X\). So long as we will have a reason to avoid agony in the future—presumably anyone in agony will have a reason to avoid agony—we now have a reason to pursue having a reason to avoid that agony.

In this paper, I develop Sobel’s account of subjectivism and argue that the only way for Sobel to defend RTP leads to a troubling implication for his view — the implication that his own view should not qualify as “subjectivist.” RTP can only be successfully defended on the grounds that we have reasons independent of *our attitudes*, and it is this claim that all subjectivists agree that we ought to reject. I begin in section \(\S1\) by setting the scene for the debate. I present both Parfit’s Agony Argument and Sobel’s account of subjectivism. In \(\S2\) I argue that Sobel’s defense of RTP fails because the only tenable justification for RTP is one that runs counter to a core tenet of subjectivism — the claim that reasons are a function of one’s attitudes. To defend RTP, Sobel must accept that subjectivists have reasons which do not correspond to their desires.\(^6\) But once Sobel accepts

\(^5\) [Smith, 2009], 99.

\(^6\) I will use the terms “desires,” “attitudes”, and “concerns” synonymously. Furthermore, I take it that subjectivism entails that some psychological state, whether it is a desire, attitude, concern, or what not, is the source of reasons.
this point, it will be hard for him to non-arbitrarily maintain that his variety of subjectivism is in fact subjectivist. I conclude that Sobel’s defense of subjectivism is unsuccessful in §3. If subjectivists want to remain true to subjectivism, then they must accept that they do not have a reason to avoid future agony.

§ 1 The Objectivist-Subjectivist Divide  Objectivists and subjectivists disagree over what is the source of our reasons. Each provides a different answer to the question, \textit{What provides us with reasons?}. The objectivist appeals to the claim that reasons exist independently of our attitudes. Reasons are not a function of our attitudes, desires, or likings; reasons are a function of facts about the world and things therein. In contrast, the subjectivist maintains that “our favoring and disfavoring attitudes gild and stain the world with reason-providing status.”\textsuperscript{7} Reasons are a function of our attitudes and nothing more.\textsuperscript{8}

It is important to keep in mind that the primary task of this paper is to consider whether Sobel’s subjectivism is in fact “subjectivist.” Admittedly, the debate over whether Sobel’s theory counts as \textit{truly} subjectivist runs the risk of turning into a conceptual debate. One might respond that what qualifies as “subjectivist” depends on our definitions, so perhaps we just need to adjust our definitions of objectivism and subjectivism to account for Sobel’s theory. The conceptual debate is unhelpful and something which I intend to avoid in this paper. Rather, I aim to consider whether Sobel has committed himself to a theory of reasons which even he finds objectionable. More specifically, does Sobel’s acceptance of RTP commit him to the view that reasons are no longer solely a function of our attitudes? Interestingly, Sobel addresses this question and in one quick paragraph dismisses it as if there was no consequence to accepting the title, “objectivist.” He concedes,

\textit{...suppose I am wrong, and subjectivists must abandon subjectivism to make claims like the Reasons Transfer Principle. The subjectivist would then be forced to abandon the label ‘subjectivism,’ but look at what they get in return. The resulting objectivist view would claim that all our reasons ulti-}

\textsuperscript{7} [Sobel, 2011], 67.
\textsuperscript{8} I use the terms “attitudes”, “desires”, and “concerns” interchangeably. I will not address whether these psychological states have significant differences, or which exact psychological state is the source of reasons.
mately derive from concerns we have no reasons to have and that additional derived reasons are restricted to that which provides clever ways to achieve lives that involve getting as much of what we really want over time as possible.¹⁹

If it turns out that Sobel’s view is in fact objectivist, then subjectivists will have lost much more than a “label.” Sobel will now be committed to the view that reasons exist independent of one’s actual attitudes; his position on the nature of reasons will have changed drastically. As a result, many subjectivists will be quick to dismiss Sobel’s theory of subjectivism. Presumably, Sobel assumes that nothing other than the name of his theory will change – attitudes are still the source of our reasons, including attitudes independent of our actual attitudes. But this is a false assumption. He must explain how he could limit the source of reasons to actual and future attitudes. But by accepting the claim that future attitudes are reason-giving he has opened the door to actual attitude-independent reasons. The question is why we should limit actual-attitude independent reasons to actual and future attitudes. ¹⁰ If Sobel is willing to make this concession, then a debate over theories of reasons will have morphed into a debate over which kind of objectivism is best.

Before jumping into objections to Sobel’s view, let us take a closer look at Parfit’s objection to subjectivism, the Agony Argument, and Parfit’s account of subjectivism.

§ 1.1 The Agony Argument  Parfit’s Agony Argument, in its simplest form, is that we each have current reasons to avoid future agony; subjective accounts of reasons cannot vindicate this fact; and therefore, subjective accounts must be rejected.

¹⁹ [Sobel, 2011], 66.
¹⁰ This is an interesting problem, and one which I do not have the time to go into in this paper. The pressing question is whether Sobel’s theory of subjectivism could qualify as objectivism and remain the same as is. In other words, could Sobel keep his theory of reasons and just change the title to objectivist? It seems as if Sobel is willing to admit that his theory is objectivist, then he will be committed to all sorts of attitude-independent reasons which he has denied in the past. How might an objectivist of this sort limit our reasons without resulting in an ad hoc theory?
For Parfit, one of the primary reasons that the subjectivist falls victim to the Agony Argument is that subjective accounts can only grant reason-giving authority to desires we currently have or would have after informed deliberation. Since subjectivists can only grant reason-giving authority to current desires and desires one would have after informed deliberation, there is no guarantee that a person will have the desire to avoid future agony. One is not required to consider future desires, and so, there is always the possibility that “a person might lack any current desire, even after informed deliberation,” including the desire to want to avoid future agony.\(^{11}\) Parfit maintains that the only way that a person might have reason to consider his or her future desires, on a subjectivist account, is if they are currently concerned about their future desires.

As we will see, Sobel argues that the subjectivist can avoid the Agony Argument because they have the resources to appeal to a principle which requires that we consider future concerns. Implicit to Sobel’s argument is the claim that the subjectivist can provide a justification for facilitating the pursuit of future concerns without appealing to reasons independent of our desires, attitudes, concerns, and other subjectivist-friendly sources. Next, I develop Sobel’s defense. I then argue that it is unclear whether subjectivists can justify the use of such a principle.

§1.2 Sobel’s Subjectivism

Sobel’s subjectivism is a kind of Ideal Advisor view. Ideal Advisor views entail that our reasons are determined by some feature (e.g., beliefs or desires) of our ideal advisor’s, where “an ideal advisor” is an individual who has undergone some process of ideal procedural deliberation. Ideal procedural deliberation may include the process of gaining all relevant information or of being fully rational. On Sobel’s Ideal Advisor view, a desire qualifies as the “right sort” of desire or as reason-giving if and only if the desire is a desire of our ideal advisor’s.\(^{12}\)

In other words, any desire that we would have as a result of gaining full-information qualifies as reason-giving.

Sobel justifies an appeal to full information on the grounds that it gives those desires that are the product of full information “an especially obvious kind of

\(^{11}\) Sobel, 2011, 54.

\(^{12}\) Sobel, 2009, 337.
authority.” He explains:

My point is that there is a mismatch between the understanding an agent has of X when she has an intrinsic desire for X that would not be sustained in light of accurate information about X and the true nature of X. In these cases I want to say that the agents desire for X is not genuinely for X as it in fact is. The desire is not responsive to the true nature of its object, and in that sense, is not really for it. It is this distinction, I take it, that we are after when we say that we did not really want something. It was only wanted to the extent that we were ignorant of its true nature. Our informed desires are, in a sense, more genuinely for their object. And such desires are what we ordinarily would have referred to as what we really want.

Ideal procedural deliberation helps us determine what “we ‘really want’.” It is only when we have adequate knowledge of the possible objects of our desires that we can determine what we really want, otherwise we run the risk of mistakenly believing that we desire something. For example, consider the practice of wine tasting. Wine tasting requires that individuals cleanse their palate before tasting a new wine in order to increase the likelihood that individuals will gain a full experience of the taste of the wine. Without cleansing the palate, one runs the risk of mixing other flavors with the taste of the wine. Cleansing one’s palate allows one to truly taste the wine and, as a result, decide whether they really desire the taste of that wine. In the same way that one must fully and accurately taste a wine to judge whether they desire the wine, Sobel argues that we must have full information of the objects of our desires to decipher whether we really desire those objects. With full-information, our actual desires can accurately track our true desires, and hence, those desires that exist as a result of full information are more authoritative than those desires that do not exist as a result of full information. That is, we have more reason to give authority to those desires which result from full information and so portray our desires accurately, than to those desires that are the result of misinformation.

A full information account of ideal procedural deliberation is justified on the grounds that it strengthens the normative authority of reason-giving desires. With

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13 [Sobel, 2011], 77.
14 [Sobel, 2009], 347.
full information of the objects of our desires we can rest assured that our actual desires accurately correspond to what we truly desire, and in turn, the desires that are reason-giving can rightly be authoritative. Sobel adds a further constraint to his full information account of subjectivism; full information requires that “ideally sound deliberators must reason in accord with something like what I call the ‘reasons transfer principle’.”  

Recall the reasons transfer principle:

(RTP): if one will later have a reason to get $X$, then one now has a reason to facilitate the later getting of $X$.

Our future concerns qualify as relevant information required for gaining full information, and hence, ideally sound deliberators are obligated to invoke RTP.

Sobel claims that future concerns qualify as relevant because, rather than view individuals as time-slices and prioritize our present time-slice over our future time-slice, we should presuppose a more intuitive picture of the “self” where individuals are “temporally extended creatures.” Since the self is extended over time, we should not prioritize our current set of desires or concerns over our future desires; rather, we have reason to consider our concerns extended across our entire life. He explains that the main line of thought is 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.”

We can summarize Sobel’s justification of RTP with two main premises: (i) a consideration of our future concerns is required for ideal procedural deliberation; and (ii) since we are temporally extended creatures, we have reason to pursue whatever our concerns are throughout our entire life. Sobel argues that so long as the subjectivist has RTP, he or she can successfully respond to and rebut the Agony Argument. Next, I argue that a closer look at Sobel’s defense of RTP reveals otherwise.

In the light of Sobel’s account of subjectivism, I consider whether Sobel can successfully appeal to RTP.

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15 [Sobel, 2009], 76.
16 [Sobel, 2011], 72.
17 [Sobel, 2011], 64.
§2 Objections to Sobel’s Subjectivism  

Sobel argues that RTP is justified on the grounds that it is one requirement for ideal procedural deliberation, and since the subjectivist has the resources to defend ideal procedural deliberation, subjectivists have the resources to defend RTP. Furthermore, Sobel argues that subjectivists can defend RTP while maintaining a core tenet of subjectivism – the claim that reasons are a function of our attitudes.

First, I argue that RTP cannot be justified as a kind of ideal procedural deliberation. Second, I demonstrate that the only tenable defense of RTP available is one that appeals to facts independent of our attitudes.

§2.1 Actual Attitudes  

Before proceeding to the argument against subjectivism, a point of clarification is needed. Note that I am not objecting to the claim that we may sometimes fail to desire what we would in fact desire, perhaps due to a lack of information. For example, Ginger has a boyfriend that, unbeknownst to her, is cheating on her. If Ginger knew that her boyfriend was cheating on her, then given her psychology, values, and so on, she would break up with him. Without that information, Ginger continues to desire to stay with her boyfriend. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that Ginger’s actual attitudes are those attitudes that she would have if she had full information. We can say that her present attitudes are not a reflection of her actual attitudes.

I use the term “actual attitudes” to refer to those attitudes that we can call our own, regardless of whether we do or do not have those attitudes at a given time. There is something about our “self” or psychology which has a close connection to our attitudes, and hence, our reasons are a function of those attitudes that correspond to, or a result of, our psychology. I grant that Sobel has adequately defended the claim that reasons are a function of our actual attitudes, not necessarily our present attitudes.

In what follows, I argue that the problem with RTP is similar to the problem with Ideal Advisor views pointed out by Connie Rosati. She argues that Ideal Advisor views are troubling since “the changes that a person must undergo to become fully informed...do not guarantee that we are the persons who occupy
the ideal standpoint." Our future selves and our current selves may have such distinct values, desires, and psychologies, that it is difficult to see how we could justify the claim that our future concerns are a function of our actual attitudes. While I think that Sobel has given us reason to believe that we can use some form of ideal procedural deliberation without running into trouble (as in the case of Ginger), I do not think that RTP counts as a justified form of ideal procedural deliberation. It is unclear whether our future attitudes are our own or are alien to our own. And if it turns out that our future attitudes are alien to our own, then an appeal to RTP entails that our reasons are no longer solely a function of our actual attitudes. I argue that our future attitudes are typically irrelevant for determining our present concerns and reasons because our future selves are often so different from our current selves. As a result, a principle which requires that we consider our future concerns leads to the conclusion that our reasons are “alien” to us.

§2.2 The Case of Quinn

At age 22, fresh-out-of-school Quinn reflects and realizes that his desire is to master and win as many competitive sports competitions as possible. Given his love of food, he decides that his first task will be to pursue become a competitive eating champion. In the next decade, Quinn trains and becomes a world champion competitive eater. After winning every significant eating competition in the world, he is satisfied with his mastery of the sport, and proceeds to the next one. Years go by and by age 40, Quinn begins to pursue a new competitive sport: wife-carrying, the fascinating sport of carrying one’s wife upside and over one’s back through an obstacle course in an attempt to finish the course as fast as possible. His wife is relatively small, he is still in great shape, and he wants to maintain his fitness, so he figures that wife-carrying will be a great way to fulfill his desires. He commits to becoming the next wife-carrying champion.

There is no doubt that Quinn at age 22 has very different goals than Quinn at age 40. However, if Quinn is a going to be a good Sobelian-type subjectivist, then 22 year-old Quinn has reason to facilitate the pursuit and achievement of his

\[\text{Rosati, 1995}, 311.\]
later concerns, including the concern to be the next wife-carrying champion. At age 40 Quinn desires to be the next wife-carrying champion, and in virtue of his desire, he has a reason to ensure that he becomes an excellent wife-carrier. But 22 year-old Quinn desires to be a competitive eater. Surely, training for competitive eating is quite different than training for wife-carrying, but according to RTP Quinn has reason to pursue the fulfillment of both a life of competitive eating and wife-carrying. But Quinn has very different desires and concerns at both points in his life; Quinn at 22 values eating gross amounts of food, exercising his core, and stretching his stomach, while 40 year-old Quinn values running with his wife on his back, jumping through obstacle courses, and avoiding eating too much food.

What reason does Quinn have to consider and facilitate the pursuit of his future concerns — wife-carrying training? According to Sobel’s defense of RTP, the only explanation and justification that we have for the claim that Quinn should pursue his future reasons is that as ideal deliberators we must consider all relevant information, including our future concerns. Our future concerns count as our own concerns because we are time-extended creatures. However, Sobel and similar-minded subjectivists originally defended ideal procedural deliberation on the grounds that it gives more authority to our desires. Sobel maintains that subjectivists should require a full-information account of idealization because “desires that do not involve this perfect forecast are, in a sense, not actually for the option as it is but rather for the option as it is falsely imagined to be...The point of idealization is to given an accurate understanding of what an option that one is assessing is like...To the extent that an idealization cannot promise this, it loses this strong and intuitive rationale.”

Since the core tenet of subjectivism revolves around the notion that our desires are the source of our reasons, it is understandable that the subjectivist would want to make sure that we give authority to those desires which are the result of accurate information. But we will see that RTP cannot be defended by the same kind of justification. RTP takes the focus away from the object of our desires and prioritizes our future selves, our future experiences, choices, and so on. The question becomes why should we claim that our reasons are a function of our future attitudes or desires? For RTP to be defended,

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19 [Sobel, 2009], 345.
the subjectivist must argue that our future desires qualify as *our actual attitudes*, and we have reason to doubt that our future concerns are a function of our actual attitudes.

§2.3 Objections to RTP  First, a requirement that we consider our future values leads to a theory where reasons are alien to our own desires and values, and it goes without saying that alien reasons leads to the problem of having reasons which undermine what we conceive of as our own reasons. Quinn has chosen to pursue the life of a competitive sports champion. To fulfill his desire, he must focus on one sport at a time to become the best he can at any one activity. To require him to pursue both activities at age 22 undermines his current desires and values, and requires that he no longer live according to his desire-given reasons. A central problem with RTP is that it entails that we can have reasons which seem wholly alien to our desires, concerns, and values, and even undermines our current desires. This is clearly contrary to the primary motivation for subjectivism, a view entails that our reasons stem from our desires.

Second, even if we are willing to accept a theory of reasons where our reasons are alien to our actual attitudes, then we must explain how it is that we can *feel the weight* of our reasons, or how such reasons could bear any normative force. If reasons exist in virtue of our desires, what could motivate Quinn to value and pursue something so irrelevant and contrary to his current desires? Subjectivists agree that reasons are a function of our actual attitudes. If reasons were not a function of our own attitudes, then we would inevitably question both where such reasons stem from and how we could be motivated to pursue such reasons. Rosati argues that Ideal Advisor views face a similar problem: “you will not be motivated upon learning of the desires of your fully informed self by the consideration that it is ‘you,’ but rather it will be ‘you’ only if you are motivated.”²⁰ Alien reasons lack normative force for individuals who maintain that reasons exist in virtue of our desires. A future self is likely to have drastically different sets of values, desires, and hence, reasons. Hence, our reasons for thinking that our current and future selves are identical are tenuous. The only way to avoid this problem is for Sobel

²⁰ [Rosati, 1995], 311.
to make the ad hoc move to limit the use of RTP to cases where one’s current self has a certain amount of similarity with one’s future self.

Lastly, there is a key distinction between advocating a process of ideal procedural deliberation and advocating RTP. We can justifiably ask whether we should take into consideration our future reasons whereas it doesn’t make sense to ask why we should embrace the process of ideal procedural idealization. If a theory of reasons entails that our desires are authoritative, then it follows that we should make sure that we have full information of the objects of our desires so that we can ensure whether we truly desire some object or merely think we desire some object. The requirement that we ought to pursue the fulfillment of our future reasons does not have this kind of authority or priority. It is neither unreasonable nor unnecessary to ask why we should consider our future reasons, whereas it is unreasonable to claim that we shouldn’t care about having full information of the objects of our desires or prioritize what we really would want (assuming that we accept the claim that desires are authoritative). This distinction draws out the problem that ideal procedural deliberation does not choose which desires are reason-giving, however, RTP requires that we give reason-giving authority to a specific set of desires (our future desires). By embracing RTP, the subjectivist commits herself to a theory of reasons where reasons correspond to something other than one’s actual attitudes or desires. Our desires are no longer the source of reasons.

These points lead us to a troubling conclusion for Sobel. A subjectivism which embraces RTP will end up looking like anything but subjectivist. Sobel’s view includes that we can have alien reasons – reasons which undermine what we conceive of as our own, which lack normative force, and reasons that are the result of something other than our desires. If RTP entails that our desires are not the result of our own desires, then it follows that some desires are reason-giving for a reason other than the fact that we desire them.

§3 Conclusion Sobel has attempted to defend subjectivism against Parfit’s Agony Argument. Sobel claims that subjectivists always have reason to consider and facilitate the pursuit of their future concerns, but as we have seen, this leads to troubling consequences for the subjectivist. Sobel’s subjectivism generates several
worries: one’s future desires are potentially alien to one’s current reasons; one is likely to lack motivation to pursue a reason that is contrary to their current desires and values; and if one’s reasons no longer correspond to his or her desires, then the nature of reasons must be something other than one’s actual desires. The subjectivist is at a loss to explain how they might defend RTP without appealing to reasons independent of one’s desires. Not only does RTP lead to the conclusion that we can have reasons which are alien to our own, but there is no justification for RTP that is subjectivist friendly. Subjectivist reasons are now the product of something other than our reasons.

In conclusion, Sobel’s account of subjectivism and any account of subjectivism which appeals to RTP, leads to a view which is contrary to a primary motivation for subjectivism—the aim of achieving what one really wants.
References


