

Nothing “Really” Matters, but That’s Not What Matters

Sharon Street
New York University

1. Introduction

Does anything really matter? The answer depends on what one means by “really.” If the question is whether anything really matters in Derek Parfit’s robustly attitude-independent sense, then I believe the answer is no, nothing really matters in that sense. Nothing matters, ultimately, independently of the attitudes of beings who take things to matter. To matter is to matter from the point of view of someone.

Should this antirealist answer to the question disturb us? Parfit thinks that it should. He believes that to conclude that nothing really matters in his sense is to conclude that nothing matters, full stop. He believes that the only genuine alternative to his position is nihilism, more or less well disguised. This is a false choice, however, and the aim of this essay is to show why. Nothing “really” matters in Parfit’s robustly attitude-independent sense, but plenty of things *matter*. Moreover, plenty of things “really” matter if we allow, as I think we should, that existing independently of a subject’s point of view on the world is not the only way of being “real.” Normativity depends on the attitudes of beings who take things to matter, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.

Parfit does not wish to call his view a brand of *realism* about normativity, but I believe *non-naturalist realism* continues to be the least misleading term for it.¹ In this essay, I will argue that Parfit’s defense of non-naturalist realism against metaphysical and epistemological objections in *On What Matters* is undermined by a failure to distinguish clearly enough between the claim that

(1) There are reasons in the standard normative sense.

and the claim that

(1') There are *robustly attitude-independent* reasons in the standard normative sense.

To put it another way, Parfit’s defense of non-naturalist realism is undermined by a failure to distinguish clearly enough between the claim that

(2) There are irreducibly normative truths.

and the claim that

(2') There are *robustly attitude-independent* irreducibly normative truths.

As I will try to show, at key moments in his defense of non-naturalism, Parfit sometimes assumes, without adequate examination or argument, that claims (1) and (1'), or claims (2) and

(2'), are interchangeable. But they are not interchangeable. The upshot is that oftentimes when Parfit believes he is successfully defending (1') or (2')—*realism* about normative reasons—he is in fact successfully defending only (1) or (2)—*non-skepticism* about normative reasons. But the antirealist has no dispute with (1) or (2)—or anyway, shouldn't, I'll argue. The antirealist's dispute is with (1') and (2'). *These* are the claims that introduce metaphysical and epistemological problems, yet these are the claims that Parfit fails adequately to defend.

The essay is organized as follows. In sections 2-4, I examine Parfit's treatment of Bernard Williams's views, arguing that Parfit does not distinguish clearly enough between the claim that there are reasons in the standard normative sense and the claim that there are *external* reasons in the standard normative sense. In section 5, I explain why all parties to the discussion—realists and antirealists alike—can agree *that there are reasons in the standard normative sense* without thereby taking on any commitments that are metaphysically or epistemologically problematic. I distinguish between *modest* and *robust* attitude-independence, and argue that it's only when one supposes that there are *robustly* attitude-independent normative reasons that one gets into metaphysical and epistemological trouble. In section 6, I examine Parfit's response, in chapter 33 of *On What Matters*, to my "evolutionary debunking" arguments against non-naturalist realism. I argue that Parfit's response fails because Parfit does not distinguish adequately between skepticism about *normativity* (not my position) and skepticism about *realism* about normativity (my position).

In the final section, I turn to larger issues raised by the discussion. Locating the conceptual space for a position that is not either non-naturalist realism or nihilism is philosophically essential. But locating this space does not, of course, mean life is easy. In particular, it does not mean that nothing remains to the deeper undercurrent of our worries about nihilism. For it is still open to someone to hold—and indeed, it is possible to interpret Parfit and other non-naturalist realists as holding—the *substantive normative position* that nothing matters unless it matters independently of our attitudes. As I'll briefly argue, however, understanding this view as a substantive normative position changes how we think about it. In particular, it is not clear what good reason there is to hold this normative position, any more than it is clear what good reason there is to hold that nothing matters unless there is a god. The threat of nihilism never goes away, on the view I suggest, but the correct way to understand it is as a causal threat, not a rational one. We have good reason to fear the view that nothing matters, but we should fear it in just the same way that we fear illness, death, or a fall into depression.

2. We can all agree that the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense is primitive and irreducible

One of the most surprising claims in *On What Matters* is Parfit's claim that his friend and colleague Bernard Williams "did not understand the distinctive concept of a non-psychological *purely normative* reason" (*OWM*, II, 435). In one of the book's most autobiographically revealing passages, Parfit quotes Hume on the "wretched condition" in which Hume's philosophical thinking left him, then writes:

My predicament is partly similar. Most philosophers seem to reject my meta-ethical and other meta-normative beliefs. In one way, my predicament is worse than Hume's. Many of these other people don't even understand what I believe. When I talk to these people, we can't even disagree. It took me some time to realize the state that I am in. Given the range, subtlety, and depth of Williams's writings about normative questions, I assumed for many years that Williams had some purely normative beliefs. I failed to see that Williams's claims about reasons, and about what we ought to do, are really psychological claims about how we might be motivated to act. I also failed to understand Mackie's similar claims. Since I knew both these people well, I am puzzled and disturbed by our failures to understand each other. (*OWM*, II, 452)

For reasons that will suggest themselves, I do not think this is the best way for Parfit to read Williams. In what follows, however, I wish to set aside all interpretive questions about Williams's writings. What matters for my purposes is simply that, as I will argue in this and the following two sections: (1) in discussing Williams's views, there is an important distinction in the vicinity to which Parfit pays inadequate attention; (2) the distinction is one that all of us who are party to the discussion here and now can recognize and accept; (3) this distinction may be used to locate more precisely the "thin" concept of a purely normative reason that we all share and understand, and which may be used as our common conceptual currency in debating one another; and (4) this "thin," shared concept of a normative reason turns out to be nothing other than the concept of a reason in the "standard normative sense" with which Parfit himself is rightly so concerned, but which he sometimes supposes, wrongly, to be interchangeable with the concept of an "external" reason.

Let us start by looking at what Parfit says about the concept that he thinks Williams did not understand—the concept of a "non-psychological, *purely normative* reason." Parfit gives his first gloss of this concept on the opening page of *On What Matters*:

It is hard to explain the *concept* of a reason, or what the phrase 'a reason' means. Facts give us reasons, we might say, when they count in favor of our having some attitude, or our acting in some way. But 'counts in favor of' means roughly 'gives a reason for'. Like some other fundamental concepts, such as those involved in our thoughts about time, consciousness, and possibility, the concept of a reason is indefinable in the sense that it cannot be helpfully explained merely by using words. We must explain such concepts in a different way, by getting people to think thoughts that use these concepts. (*OWM*, I, 31)

The concept Parfit has in mind is the same concept that T. M. Scanlon calls the concept of a reason in the "standard normative sense."² It is useful to quote Scanlon's language as well:

I will take the idea of a reason as primitive. Any attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to me to lead back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favor of it. "Counts in favor how" one might ask. "By providing a reason for it" seems to be the only answer. So I will presuppose the idea of a reason.³

I agree—and in my view, all parties to the discussion *should* agree—that Parfit and Scanlon are entirely correct to focus on, isolate, and distinguish from any psychological concept (such as the concept of a motivating reason), the distinctive concept of a normative reason. In other words, I agree that, just as Parfit and Scanlon claim, there exists a distinctive, non-psychological concept of one thing's *counting in favor of* or *calling for* another, and that this concept is primitive in the following sense. While we may point to the concept in various ways, locating it for one another and helping others to acquire it, there is no way to explain, in other language, the sense of the expression 'a normative reason' without in one way or another merely invoking other normative terms. Normative concepts are irreducible and indefinable in this sense.⁴

While the following point is in one sense obvious, it is important for what comes later to pause here and take note: In agreeing with Parfit and Scanlon that there is—and that all of us understand and possess—the concept of a *non-psychological, purely normative reason*, we are not (certainly not yet, anyway) assenting to anything metaphysically or epistemologically problematic. Here's one way of explaining why this is so. As I see it, one way to point to the concept of a normative reason (and other normative concepts, such as the concept of something's being *required* or *demande*d) is to point to a certain type of conscious experience with which we're all intimately familiar. The intrinsic character of this experience cannot accurately be captured or described except by invoking normative language—just as, for example, the intrinsic character of the experience of redness cannot accurately be described except by invoking color language—but that doesn't mean we can't locate for one another the type of experience in question by pointing to the kinds of circumstances in which those of us who are party to the discussion tend to have it. In other words, just as we point to the experience of redness by pointing to the kinds of circumstances in which we typically have it—for example, when looking

at ripened strawberries or a New York fire truck—so we may point to what we might call the experience of “to-be-done-ness” by pointing to the kinds of circumstances in which we typically have it—for example, when a car suddenly swerves toward us on the highway, or when we see a child in pain. In such moments, we have a conscious experience of certain features of the world—the swerving car, the child’s pain—as what we can only describe as *calling for*, or *counting in favor of*, or *demanding*, or *requiring*—certain responses on our part—evasive action, a helping response, and so on. The intrinsic character of the type of conscious experience in question—the experience of something as *to be done*, or of one thing as *counting as a reason* for another—cannot accurately be described except by invoking normative concepts. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t all understand perfectly well the concept we’re talking about here. And to be clear: There is of course no thought or claim here that the concept of a normative reason is the same as the concept of the *experience* of something as normative reason. These are obviously not the same concepts. The claim, rather, is that one way in which we get our handle on the simple, irreducible concept of a normative reason—the concept of one thing’s counting in favor of, or calling for, another—is by having a certain kind of conscious experience.⁵

Furthermore—as I take it to be clear—acknowledging all of the above doesn’t (not yet, anyway) commit us to anything that should, from a metaethical perspective, raise metaphysical or epistemological worries. Roughly speaking, about the epistemology: There is no great mystery here about how we acquire normative concepts any more than there is a great mystery about how we acquire concepts such as *redness* or *the scent of roses*; we acquire normative concepts in virtue of having a certain kind of conscious experience and being part of a linguistic community whose practices help us learn to pick that kind of experience out. Roughly speaking, about the metaphysics: Merely acknowledging that we possess a certain concept, which we’ve come to understand in virtue of being the subject of a certain type of conscious experience, of course does not commit us to the view that there exists, “out there” in the world, some robustly mind-independent thing that “corresponds to” or is “tracked by” the concept in question. Maybe there is such a thing; maybe there isn’t. We haven’t said anything about this so far. In other words, acknowledging that we understand and possess the concept of a *purely normative reason* does not commit us to thinking that there is something (in particular, a normative reason) that exists in a way that is robustly independent of the type of conscious experience being talked about—any more so than acknowledging that one had a certain dream commits one to the view that the thing one dreamed about actually happened. Similarly—and this point is equally central in what follows—acknowledging that we understand and possess the concept of a purely normative reason of course also does not commit us to thinking that there *isn’t* something (in particular, a normative reason) that exists in a way that is independent of the type of conscious experience being talked about.

Let all parties to the discussion agree, then, that the concept of a normative reason is the concept of one thing’s calling for, or counting in favor of, something else, and that it is a primitive, irreducible concept in just the way that Parfit and Scanlon claim. Let us furthermore take note that granting that much on all sides does not—certainly not without further argument, anyway—take us anywhere toward answering the question whether there do or do not exist any normative reasons in a way that is robustly independent of the states of conscious experience we have just been talking about. The concept we are pointing to is—on its face, anyway—entirely silent on the issue.⁶

3. The concept of a reason in the standard normative sense is not the concept of an external reason

With these thoughts in mind, let us return to Parfit's discussion of Williams, and in particular, to Parfit's characterization of the internalism/externalism distinction. Trouble starts, in my view, when Parfit draws a distinction between what he calls *Analytical Internalism* and *Externalism*. *Analytical Internalism*, as Parfit defines it, is the view that

When we say that

(D) someone has *decisive reasons* to act in a certain way, or *should* or *ought* to act in this way,

we often mean something like

(E) this act would best fulfill this person's present fully informed telic desires, or is what, after fully informed and procedurally rational deliberation, this person would be most robustly motivated to do, or would choose to do. (*OWM*, II, 270)

"This claim," Parfit says, "defines the *internal senses* of the words 'decisive reason', 'should', and 'ought'" (*ibid.*). Parfit then continues:

According to some other people, whom Williams calls

Externalists: We often use words like 'reason', 'should', and 'ought' in other, simpler, irreducibly normative senses.

These we can call the *external senses* of these words. (*Ibid.*)

One may define one's terms however one likes, of course, and this way of drawing the distinction finds some support in Williams's writings. None of that matters for my point here, though. The point I wish to make here is just that the moment Parfit decides to use the terms this way, he sets up a terminological situation in which important conceptual possibilities become far too easy to overlook. In particular, he sets up a situation in which it becomes far too easy to confuse the view that

(3) There are reasons in the standard normative sense.

with the view that

(3') Not only are there reasons in the standard normative sense, but among those reasons are ones with the following characteristic: agents have those reasons even if there is no sound deliberative route from their subjective motivational set to the conclusion that they have those reasons.

In other words, there is a position available here which: (1) agrees with Parfit's so-called "Externalist" that "we often use words like 'reason', 'should', and 'ought' in...[simple], irreducibly normative senses"; (2) furthermore agrees *that there are reasons* in this standard normative sense; but then (3) denies that *among those* normative reasons are "external" reasons in the *different* sense of normative reasons that agents have even in circumstances in which there is no sound deliberative route from the agent's subjective motivational set to the conclusion that he has those reasons.

It's not that Parfit doesn't see room for this position; he does. Indeed, Parfit explicitly considers the hypothesis that Williams held the above position. Parfit writes:

When Williams makes claims about reasons for acting, he may seem to be using the phrase 'a reason' in the indefinable normative sense that we can also express with the phrase 'counts in favor'. That is how Scanlon interprets Williams's view. This view, Scanlon writes,

does not reflect skepticism about reasons in the standard normative sense... Williams seems to be offering a substantive, normative thesis about what reasons we have.

This interpretation is, I believe, mistaken. Williams did not understand this concept of a reason. (*OWM*, II, 433-434)

Here Parfit explicitly considers the possibility that when Williams denied the existence of “external reasons,” he was not denying the existence of reasons in the “standard normative sense,” but rather just the existence of a certain *kind* of reasons in the standard normative sense—namely ones that exist independently of our subjective motivational sets in a very robust sense. I agree with Scanlon that this is the best, most charitable interpretation of Williams’s denial of the existence of external reasons. As before, however, the important point here has nothing to do with what Williams did or didn’t think, or how most charitably to interpret his writings. It just has to do with a distinction that all of us here and now need, and are able to make, and which becomes extremely easy to miss when we draw the internalism/externalism distinction as Parfit does in these passages.

One way to put the point is this. As the above passage reveals, Parfit himself recognizes the possibility of reading the “internalism/externalism” debate as a *substantive normative debate* about what kinds of normative reasons there are, conducted in terms of the shared concept of a reason in the standard normative sense. On this way of understanding the debate, all parties to the debate agree at the outset that there are reasons in the standard normative sense—that is, in the primitive, irreducible sense of considerations that *count in favor of* or *call for* certain responses on our part—and then proceed to argue about what reasons in the standard normative sense there are, focusing on a specific set of cases. The specific set of cases they are arguing about are those in which it is stipulated that there is no sound deliberative route to a given normative conclusion from the agent’s own subjective motivational set. According to *externalists*, there are some normative reasons that an agent has even if there is no sound deliberative route to that conclusion from his own subjective motivational set. *Internalists*, meanwhile, agree that there are reasons in the standard normative sense, but deny that there are any normative reasons of a certain sort—namely ones that exist independently of whether there is a sound deliberative route to the conclusion that they exist from the subjective motivational set of the agent whose normative reasons are in question.

Notice, moreover, that on this way of understanding the internalism/externalism debate, all parties to the debate grant at the outset that there is no *conceptually* necessary tie between normative reasons and motivation. For all either party to the debate is assuming, in other words, it is entirely possible, as a *conceptual* matter, for there to be normative reason for an agent to do something even though there is no sound deliberative route to that conclusion from that agent’s subjective motivational set. Notice also, however: To agree that there is no *conceptually necessary* tie between normative reasons and motivation is of course not to agree that *there is no tie*. This is so in just the same way in which the following is so: To agree that it’s not *conceptually true* that I have reason to brush my teeth regularly is of course not to agree that *I don’t have reason to brush my teeth regularly*.

We may summarize the crucial point this way. Distinguish between the following three senses of the concept of a normative reason:

1. The concept *normative reason*_{INT}, which has “built into it,” as a presupposition involved in deploying the concept, that nothing can be reason for agent *A* unless there is a “sound deliberative route” from *A*’s subjective motivational set to the conclusion that it is such a reason.
2. The concept *normative reason*_{EXT}, which has “built into it,” as a presupposition involved in deploying the concept, that there *are* external reasons, in the sense of reasons for agents to do things even in cases where there is no sound deliberative route from their own subjective motivational set to the conclusion that it is a reason.

3. The concept *normative reason*_{NEUT}, which has neither of the above presuppositions built into it; this concept of a reason is *neutral* on the issue of whether there are, or there aren't, any reasons that exist independently of whether there is a sound deliberative route to this conclusion from the subjective motivational set of the agent whose reasons are in question.

The problem that emerges in his discussion of Williams is that Parfit sometimes slips into assuming there are only two concepts of a normative reason in play (*normative reason*_{INT} and *normative reason*_{EXT}), when in fact there are three. Parfit rightly insists that the concept *normative reason*_{INT} is not the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense; this he sees and insists upon quite clearly. What he does not see so clearly is that the concept *normative reason*_{EXT} is *also* not the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense. It is not, as Parfit sometimes seems to assume, built into the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense that there *are* external reasons; rather, it is built into to the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense that there *might* be external reasons. But as far as the concept itself is concerned, so to speak, there also might *not* be. My claim, then, is that Parfit sometimes fails to distinguish adequately between the concept *normative reason*_{EXT} and the concept *normative reason*_{NEUT}. As a result, he sometimes ends up assuming that the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense is the concept *normative reason*_{EXT}, when in fact it is not. The concept of a reason in the standard normative sense is the “thinner” concept *normative reason*_{NEUT}.

We start to see here why Parfit doesn't really see room for a position that is not either his own or else a form of nihilism: Because of his failure to distinguish clearly enough between the concept *normative reason*_{EXT} and the concept *normative reason*_{NEUT}, he hears any denial of the existence of *external reasons* as a denial of the existence of *reasons*. But these are not the same thing. One may be a skeptic about the former without being a skeptic about the latter.

4. Analytical externalism?

I have been arguing that Parfit sometimes confuses the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense with the concept of an external reason in the standard normative sense. One might object to this as follows.⁷ It's not that Parfit is in any way failing to notice the difference between these two concepts; it's rather that Parfit regards himself as having established through argument that these concepts are one and the same, such that he is now entitled to move fluidly between them, using them interchangeably, without additional comment. The suggestion here is that while one might at first be tempted to think, as I have been suggesting, that the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense is not the concept of an external reason but rather the thinner concept *normative reason*_{NEUT}, Parfit has supplied an argument that shows that we must understand reasons in the standard normative sense as *external* reasons, otherwise they just aren't recognizable as reasons in the standard normative sense at all. The thought, in other words, is that perhaps it's analytic (presumably non-obviously so) that reasons in the standard normative sense are external reasons, such that if we conclude that there are no *external* reasons then we've concluded there are no normative reasons at all.

I believe this *is* Parfit's view—that if we conclude there are no *external* reasons then we've concluded that there are no normative reasons (in the sense of *normative reasons*_{NEUT}) at all. The problem is that it is hard to see what the argument for this point could be. Make no mistake: It's easy to see how one might argue *that there are external reasons*; on one reading, this is largely what Parfit is concerned with in Part I of *On What Matters*. To undertake this, the general method is to imagine cases in which it does *not* follow from someone's subjective motivational set that he has normative reason to act in a certain way, and then to call upon intuitions to the effect that nevertheless the agent does have normative reason to act in this way.

Parfit makes this kind of argument on a routine basis, throughout Part I and also in his discussion of Williams. In discussing Williams, for example, Parfit imagines the case he calls *Early Death*, in which

unless you take some medicine, you will later die much younger, losing many years of happy life. Though you know this fact, and you have deliberated in a procedurally rational way on this and all of the other relevant facts, you are not motivated to take this medicine. (*OWM*, II, 432)

Parfit then calls upon the intuition that in such a case, you have decisive normative reason to take this medicine. While I don't find such arguments persuasive, as I discuss elsewhere⁸ and will discuss further below, they are nevertheless clearly a way of bolstering the case *that there are external reasons*. But *that* point is not what we're talking about in the current context. We are on the hunt for an argument that shows that it's (perhaps non-obviously) *analytic* that reasons in the standard normative sense are external reasons. But cases such as *Early Death* do not help to establish *that* conclusion. First of all, it is clearly not *analytically true* that in *Early Death* one has normative reason to take the medicine. Parfit himself regards this truth, if it is one, as a substantive normative truth. Second of all, even if one cites *many* cases of this general form, as Parfit in fact does, this still does not establish that it is *analytically true* that reasons in the standard normative sense are external reasons. To do that, it seems that one would have to do something much more ambitious—namely to make the case that our “normative reasons discourse” is *so* shot through with the assumption that there are *external* normative reasons (and not just normative reasons_{NEUT}) that to give up on this assumption would vitiate the discourse so completely as to leave something unrecognizable as the same discourse. One would have to show, in other words, that to conclude that there are no *external* normative reasons would be to give up on a platitude so basic to our normative discourse that really we would have given up on the idea that there are normative reasons at all.

I will argue in the next section that this is simply not so. It is simply not plausible to think that the conclusion that there are no *robustly* attitude-independent normative reasons would leave such a gaping hole in our normative discourse that the right conclusion would be that there are no normative reasons at all. For now, however, note that *Parfit himself* seems to agree with these very same points when they present themselves in a different terminological guise. In particular, Parfit believes that the debate between “Objectivist” and “Subjectivist” theories of reasons, as he characterizes those views in Part I, is a substantive normative debate, and moreover that it is compatible with continuing to think that *there are normative reasons* to think that there are no *objective* normative reasons. He thinks that the rejection of objectivism is *substantively* implausible, but he doesn't think that to reject an objectivist theory is to embrace an error theory about normative reasons in general.⁹ Why not likewise think that it is compatible with thinking that there are reasons in the standard normative sense that there are no *external* reasons in the standard normative sense? On the way of thinking about the question I'm suggesting, these are really just the same question.¹⁰

It is revealing that in his discussion of Williams, Parfit draws a contrast between what he calls *Analytical Internalism* and just plain *Externalism*. But—to put the same point I've been making all along somewhat differently—one might have thought that the relevant point of contrast with *Analytical Internalism* would be not “Externalism” simpliciter, but *Analytical Externalism*. Talk of Externalism simpliciter is ambiguous between externalism conceived of as a substantive normative position and what we can call *Analytical Externalism*, the view that it is a (presumably non-obvious) *conceptual* truth that the concept *normative reason*_{NEUT} and the concept *normative reason*_{EXT} are one and the same. Parfit's way of dividing up the territory obscures a possibility to which we should be highly attuned, namely the possibility that *both* Analytical Internalism *and* Analytical Externalism are false. And why wouldn't this be the right view? It's plausible to think, after all, that some of the considerations that raise trouble for

Analytical Internalism might also, *mutatis mutandis*, raise trouble for *Analytical Externalism*. In other words, just as the expression ‘normative reason’ does not (as Parfit puts it) *mean* ‘internal reason’, the expression ‘normative reason’ *also* does not *mean* ‘external reason’. The expression ‘normative reason’ means nothing more or less than ‘normative reason’—exactly as Parfit himself insists in other contexts.¹¹

5. We can all agree that there are reasons in the standard normative sense

The language of “internal and external reasons” is ultimately a distraction, so let us move away from it. Let us also leave behind the cumbersome term *reason in the standard normative sense* and just say *normative reason*, understanding this expression in the “thin” sense of ***normative reason*_{NEUT.}**

There is not space to defend the suggestion here, but here is how I think the bottom-line dispute between Parfit and his antirealist opponents is best formulated. I will call the debate the *realism/antirealism* debate, fully recognizing that this terminology is misleading in certain respects, but regarding it as the best (or anyway, one of the best) among a bad set of options.¹²

Broadly speaking, the central question is whether, and if so, to what extent, normativity is ultimately mind-dependent phenomenon. That formulation is unacceptably vague, though, so more specifically: According to a *realist* such as Parfit (and many others—including quasi-realists such as Blackburn and Gibbard when they don their hats as normative theorists¹³), some fact or consideration *X* can be a normative reason for agent *A* to *Y* even if the conclusion that it is such a reason is in no way logically or instrumentally entailed by *A*’s global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts. The *antirealist*, in contrast, denies that there are any such robustly attitude-independent reasons. He or she denies that anything could have the status of a normative reason for someone in a way that is robustly independent of their conscious experience of some things as “calling for” or “counting in favor” of other things. For example, returning to Parfit’s *Early Death* case: If we stipulate that it in no way follows from the person’s own global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts that she has reason to take the medicine, then the antirealist denies that the person in question has normative reason to take the medicine. According to the antirealist, there are no normative reasons apart from what follows from within a person’s normative standpoint on the world. Instead, whether a given consideration *X* is a normative reason for agent *A* to *Y* depends on whether the conclusion that *X* is a normative reason for agent *A* to *Y* is entailed by *A*’s global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts.

This way of drawing the distinction raises many questions that I won’t be able to address here. But a few important points. First, on this understanding, the realism/antirealism debate is a *substantive normative debate* conducted in terms of the shared, “thin” concept of a normative reason, which is understood as itself *neutral* on the realism/antirealism question. The concept of a normative reason is assumed by both parties to the debate—the realist and the antirealist—to have some legitimate application. Their disagreement is about where, in particular, it has legitimate application. In other words, both parties to the debate agree *that there are normative reasons*; they just disagree about what normative reasons there are. The realist thinks that there are robustly attitude-independent ones in the sense I’ve now indicated; the antirealist denies this, insisting that nothing is a reason unless this status is ultimately “given to it,” so to speak, by certain kinds of attitudes on our part. Put yet another way, both parties start out from a non-skeptical position about normative reasons, and both end up there; both start out by taking our normative beliefs as beliefs to which we are entitled until shown otherwise, and both end by continuing to take them this way. It’s just that the antirealist denies the existence of a certain subcategory of normative reasons whose existence the realist wants to insist upon.

Second, the antirealist can capture the idea that merely thinking something is a normative reason does not make it so, and that we can, and often do, go badly wrong about our normative reasons. As I have argued elsewhere, a constructivist view makes sense of the fact that there is a very healthy degree of possible error. What the antirealist denies is not attitude-independence, but *robust* attitude-independence.

Third, and related to that, again as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁴ the realist and the antirealist are going to be able to do an equally good job at capturing our intuitive judgments about the normative reasons of all the kinds of cases we encounter in real life. Their “verdicts,” in fact, are only clearly going to diverge when it comes to a set of characters I’ve called *ideally coherent eccentrics*.

I cannot defend that point here, but it is crucial for our purposes. Recall that we were considering the view that *Analytical Externalism* might be true. Here, then, is one way of arguing that it can’t be. The realist and the antirealist are in virtual full agreement about all real-life cases—all the kinds of cases in the context of which our concept of a normative reason “grew up,” so to speak. In other words—as Parfit himself admits in the context of the *Objectivism/Subjectivism debate*¹⁵—the views do an equally good job of capturing a huge swath of our intuitive judgments about cases, coming apart only with regard to esoteric ones. I strongly agree with Parfit that these cases are philosophically pivotal, but that doesn’t change the fact that they’re esoteric, not the kinds of cases we run into here on planet Earth. It is therefore implausible to say that antirealist conclusions diverge so much from the everyday platitudes associated with the concept of a normative reason that we must regard the discovery of its truth as vitiating the concept of a normative reason to such an extent that the upshot is that there are no reasons at all.

To put it somewhat differently: It is undoubtedly “built into” our concept of a normative reason that we can go wrong, and indeed very badly wrong, about our own and others’ normative reasons. But the sophisticated antirealist can (indeed rather easily, I would argue) capture that.¹⁶ In contrast, it is *not* plausibly “built into” our concept of a normative reason that it is possible to go wrong about normative reasons in the sense that only comes to light when we think about ideally coherent eccentrics, such as the person who with utter consistency doesn’t care about an early death, or about pain on future Tuesdays, etc. In other words, it is plausible that in order for a concept recognizably to be our own concept of a normative reason, what I’ll call *modest* attitude-independence is required. But it is not plausible that in order for a concept recognizably to be our concept of a normative reason, *robust* attitude-independence is required. The debate between realism and antirealism is therefore best understood as a substantive normative debate in terms of the shared, more minimal concept of a normative reason_{NEUT}.

Finally, it is worth returning at this point to something that Parfit says about Williams, and then commenting on it. In puzzling over Williams’s views, and continuing to insist that Williams lacked the concept of a purely normative reason, Parfit writes:

When I have earlier claimed that Williams did not understand this external concept of a reason, some people have urged me to be more *charitable*. These people suggest that, like Scanlon, I should assume that Williams had this concept, and was merely making different claims about which facts give us reasons. But this assumption would, I believe, be *less* charitable. If Williams *did* understand the external normative sense, why does he so often call this sense mysterious and obscure? Though many of us misunderstand our own thoughts, I find it hard to believe, given his brilliance, that *Williams* could have been so muddled or confused. And, if Williams understood the idea that certain facts might count in favor of certain acts, some of his remarks would be baffling. It would be baffling, for example, why he claims that, in *Early Death*, you have no reason to take your medicine. How could Williams believe that though, as you know, taking your medicine would give you many more years of happy life, this fact does not count in favor of your acting in this way? (*OWM*, II, 434)

In this passage Parfit again seems to be failing to distinguish clearly enough between the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense (the concept *normative reason*_{NEUT}) and the concept

normative reason_{EXT.} I think it's this conflation, in part, that makes it so hard for Parfit to understand why Williams says some of the things he does. For example, when Parfit writes "If Williams did understand the external normative sense, why does he so often call this sense mysterious and obscure?" he seems clearly to be wondering "If Williams did understand the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense, why does he so often call this sense mysterious and obscure?" Given what I have said to characterize *this* concept—as a concept that all of us are capable of acquiring in virtue of a certain kind of conscious experience that can be pointed at—it would indeed seem strange for someone to insist that they find it mysterious and obscure. As I've suggested, the concept is no more mysterious nor obscure than a color concept, or the concept of a certain taste or smell. But presumably what Williams was finding mysterious and obscure was not *this* concept—not what we are calling the notion of a reason in the standard normative sense—but rather the notion of an *external* reason in the standard normative sense.

Yet even here, Parfit is baffled. If Williams possessed the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense, then why on earth would he hold that in the case *Early Death* the fact that the medicine would save your life is not a reason for you to act that way (on the stipulation that there is no sound deliberative route to this conclusion from your own subjective motivational set)? Here, though, as someone who believes the same thing as Williams about such a case—i.e., that the consideration is *not* a reason for this person, given how we've described him or her—I can speak to Parfit's question of how someone could believe this. The answer is that someone could believe this because he or she thinks that taking the contrary view is unacceptable for *metaphysical and epistemological reasons*. In short, to posit that there is a reason to take the medicine in *Early Death* is to posit that there are normative reasons for action that exist attitude-independently in an extremely robust sense—such that a person can have a normative reason of a certain kind in a way that floats entirely free of his or her own normative responses to the world. But one might reasonably think (as I do) that to posit normative reasons of *this* kind—not just normative reasons, but *robustly attitude-independent* normative reasons—is what suddenly involves one in a host of problems, including, most notably in my view, an inability to account for how we could ever know about normative reasons of this sort. It is worth emphasizing: This is not a conceptual claim; I am not assuming that as a *conceptual* matter there need be any tie between a person's normative reasons and his or her motivations. On the contrary, I fully understand and am deploying the concept of a non-psychological, *purely normative* reason. It's just that I think epistemological considerations force us to conclude, as a substantive normative matter, that there are no robustly attitude-independent reasons.

When Parfit asks, "How could Williams believe that though, as you know, taking your medicine would give you many more years of happy life, this fact does not count in favor of your acting in this way?" the answer "maybe because he thinks metaphysical and epistemological worries force us to this view" does not even seem to be on Parfit's radar as a possibility. I take it that this is because Parfit is thinking of the claim in question—about our reason to take the medicine—as a substantive normative claim, and so more "metaethical" kinds of worries do not spring to mind as potentially relevant here. But what I hope this whole discussion shows—and what Parfit himself seems to acknowledge at other points¹⁷—is that there is ultimately no clean divide here between substantive normative issues and "metaethical" issues, such that the claim that the person has a normative reason in *Early Death* is immune to questioning based on epistemological worries. It is *not* so immune. The worry is that if you posit that there are normative reasons of this sort—robustly attitude-independent ones in the sense that they're there in a way that is *not* ultimately a function of the attitudes of the agent whose reasons are in question—then it suddenly becomes obscure what these things really could be, or how we could ever really know about them.

6. Why Parfit's reply to the evolutionary debunking argument fails

[This section is incomplete.]

In this section, I'll focus on three specific objections Parfit raises to my arguments and tell why I think they fail. There are a bunch of other objections he makes to my arguments, but I will focus on these three because they seem the most interesting and they fail, I think, in virtue of the same basic conflation I've been talking about throughout the paper.

First objection

Parfit: "These [evolutionary debunking] arguments cannot succeed, since they have one premise which is much less plausible than the normative beliefs which they claim to undermine." (*OWM*, II, 522) "Two such beliefs [that the skeptical arguments claim to undermine] are:

- (U) When certain facts imply that some belief must be true, these facts give us a decisive reason to have this belief.

And

- (V) When certain facts imply that some belief is very likely to be true, these facts give us a robust reason to have this belief.

When normative skeptics challenge these beliefs, their arguments must assume that

- (W) We have no way of knowing whether such normative beliefs are true.

Of these three claims, much the least plausible is (W). If (W) were true, we could not know whether

- (X) we ever have any reasons to have any beliefs.

But we do know that we sometimes have such reasons." (*OWM*, II, 521-2)

Reply to first objection

Nowhere in the evolutionary debunking argument is it assumed, and nowhere do I ever assume, that (W). I'm the first one to agree that we *do* have a way of knowing whether our normative beliefs are true. Indeed, it's the very implausibility of (W) that, I argue, forces us to abandon *realism*—because it's the assumption of realism that gets us to (W) as a consequence. In other words, the question is not whether (U) and (V) are true, or whether we have any way of knowing they are; I completely agree that they're true and that we have a way of knowing they are. The point that's up for discussion is whether (U) and (V) are not just true, but true in a way that is *robustly* independent of our attitudes. And the view that they are *attitude-independently* true in Parfit's very robust sense, far from being an unshakable fixed point, is itself the esoteric assumption that is ultimately less plausible than any of the others in play.

Second objection

Parfit: "On Street's account, the evolutionary forces caused us to have certain reproductively advantageous normative beliefs. We were led to believe that pain and injury are bad, and that we have robust reasons to promote the survival and well-being of ourselves and our children....

[W]e can reply that, even if [these beliefs] were [produced by natural selection], these beliefs are *not* badly mistaken, but correspond to some of the independent normative truths. Pain *is* bad, and we *do* have robust reasons to promote the survival and well-being of ourselves and our children. So even on Street's account, our normative thinking would have started with some true normative beliefs. The power of rational reflection could then have led us to believe other such truths." (*OWM*, II, 533)

Reply to second objection

This is completely inadequate as an answer to the evolutionary argument against realism. Consider an analogy. Suppose someone has just learned that his belief that Hayes was the twentieth president was implanted in him by a whimsical hypnotist. But suppose that he continues to insist that the hypnotist made him reliable with respect to the question who was the twentieth president. When you ask him why, imagine he says “I know the hypnotist made me reliable because Hayes *was* the twentieth president, and that’s exactly the belief the hypnotist implanted in me.” It is obvious that this person has supplied no good reason whatsoever to think that the hypnotist has made him reliable on the question of who was the twentieth president. Parfit’s answer here is of exactly the same form. Our question was: Why think evolutionary forces would have made us reliable with respect to independent normative truths of the kind Parfit posits? And Parfit’s answer here is that “I know evolution made me reliable because pain *is* bad, and we *do* have robust reasons to promote the survival and well-being our ourselves and our children, and those are exactly the beliefs that evolutionary forces implanted in me.” This is unacceptable in the same way that the reply in the hypnotism case is unacceptable.

Third objection

Parfit anticipates such a reply, and objects next: “To answer her argument, Street... writes, we must show that the evolutionary forces have led us to form true normative beliefs, and we must defend this claim without making any assumptions about which normative beliefs are true. What Street here requires us to do is impossible. Some whimsical despot might require us to show that some clock is telling the correct time, without making any assumptions about the correct time. Though we couldn’t meet this requirement, that wouldn’t show that this clock is not telling the correct time. In the same way, we couldn’t possibly show that natural selection had led us to form some true normative beliefs without making any assumptions about which normative beliefs are true. This fact does not count against the view that these normative beliefs are true.” (*OWM*, II, 533)

Reply to third objection

This objection is based on a serious misunderstanding of what is being asked. Here again Parfit is failing to distinguish between the view *that there are normative truths and we have some idea of what they are*, which I agree with, from the view *that there are robustly attitude-independent normative truths and we have some idea of what they are*. It’s this *latter* view that I am challenging, and which Parfit is not, in this context, simply entitled to assume without argument. I am by no means requiring that Parfit show us that evolution made us reliable about normative matters without making any assumptions about normative matters; I agree that *this* would be impossible. That is why Parfit is more than welcome to assume that pain *is* bad, and we *do* have robust reasons to promote the survival and well-being our ourselves and our children, and so on. The question we are considering is not whether we are reliable about these and other such normative matters—again, it is a key assumption of my own argument that we are. Rather, the question we are considering is whether, *on the assumption that normative truths are robustly attitude-independent*, we would have any reason to think that evolutionary forces shaped our normative beliefs in such a way as to make us reliable about them. It’s in answer to *that* question that it is unacceptable to reply: “Yes, I do have reason to think that evolutionary forces shaped our normative beliefs in such a way as to make us reliable, because the *independent normative truth* is *X*, *Y*, and *Z*, and that’s exactly what the evolutionary forces shaped me to think.”

7. Realism, theism, and nihilism as a causal threat

[This section is also incomplete.]

If the paper up to this point has been successful, we have located the conceptual space for a position that is skeptical about the existence of *robustly attitude-independent* reasons, but not about the existence of *reasons*. Locating this space doesn't mean that suddenly all our problems in life are solved, of course, nor does it mean, as we perhaps might have hoped, that there is nothing left to the deeper spirit of philosophical worries about nihilism. On the contrary, there's something big left to those worries.

The worry might be put this way: One way of reading Parfit is as holding the following *substantive normative position*:

(P1) Nothing matters unless it matters in a way that is robustly attitude-independent.

Couple this with my contention that

(P2) Nothing matters in a way that is robustly attitude-independent.

and you get the conclusion that

(C) Nothing matters.

Now obviously I think P2 is right; that's my whole view. What I want to reject, then, is P1. How might this go?

The thought is that P1 must be interpreted as a substantive normative claim that makes a claim about what matters and under what conditions. (I have argued that it cannot plausibly be understood as a *conceptual* truth.) But once one reads it as a substantive normative position, it becomes opaque why anyone would hold this substantive normative position—what reason there would be to think that something doesn't matter unless it matters (robustly) attitude-independently. Consider the analogy between:

(A) Nothing matters unless there is a god.

and

(B) Nothing matters unless there are robustly attitude-independent normative truths.

We don't find (A) plausible (Parfit explicitly rejects this idea), so the suggestion is why find (B) any more plausible?

The thing is, even if you buy this point—that (B) is an implausible substantive normative thesis—it's not true that there is nothing left to worries about nihilism. The whole idea is that things matter, but only ultimately in virtue of your thinking they do. The *causal* threat of ceasing to think things matter never goes away, and there's a kind of vertigo involved in recognizing that value is there only as long as you think it is and that you could slip into a state in which you stop thinking there is. But here it seems to me the only measures we can take against *that* possibility are causal—getting enough sleep, eating right, cultivating a wide and deep range of interests, and so on. We should fear the view that nothing matters not as a philosophical position that might, to our dismay, turn out to be correct, independently of what we think or hope—but rather as a state of mind we might fall into—false as long as we don't fall into it, but true as soon as we do.

Notes

¹ [Explain.]

² T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 19.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴ [Note about expressivism.]

⁵ [Cite and discuss McDowell.]

⁶ As I will discuss later, I do not think the concept is “silent” on the question whether it’s possible to *go wrong* about what counts in favor of what. What I deny is that the concept has built into it an assumption of *robust* attitude-independence, as opposed to *modest* attitude-independence.

⁷ I am grateful to Matthew Silverstein for pressing this point.

⁸ I explain what I think is wrong with arguments of this kind—and issue a plea that people stop making them, at least in the cursory form in which they’re usually made—in “In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally Coherent Eccentrics and the Contingency of What Matters,” *Philosophical Issues* (a supplement to *Noûs*), vol. 19 on “Metaethics,” ed. Ernest Sosa (2009): 273-298.

⁹ Actually, it’s more complicated than that. While Parfit’s official line in Part I and Part VI seems to be that Subjectivism is not Nihilism, there are moments when he suggests that Subjectivism inevitably does amount to Nihilism. [Discuss further.]

¹⁰ In other words, if we interpret the Internalism/Externalism debate as a substantive normative debate in the manner I’ve been suggesting (a debate conducted in terms of the concept *reason*_{NEUT}), then there is no meaningful distinction Objectivism/Subjectivism debate and the Internalism/Externalism debate. That is not to say that there is no way to draw a distinction between the two debates. One way to maintain a difference between what Parfit calls the Objectivism/Subjectivism debate and the Internalism/Externalism debate is to interpret the Internalism/Externalism debate not as a substantive normative debate, but rather as a conceptual debate—what I suggest in the next paragraph might better be called the *Analytical Internalism/Analytical Externalism debate*. As I suggest below, though, the problem with the Internalism/Externalism debate so understood is that the two positions are not exhaustive. There is a third position available according to which *neither* Analytical Internalism *nor* Analytical Externalism is correct. And that’s the position that I think is actually right.

¹¹ It is ultimately no assumption of *mine* that there is a clear line between what counts as a “substantive normative claim” and what counts as a “conceptual truth about normative reasons.” I’m actually quite skeptical that there is any clear line. In the end, the only point I should be seen as insisting upon is that we *not slide without realizing it* between these two different ways of thinking about the thesis of robust attitude-independence. In other words, my main point of concern is just that before we start arguing about attitude-independence, we all explicitly get on the same conceptual page—in particular, I would suggest, agreeing to talk in terms of the “thin” concept *normative reason*_{NEUT} until someone produces an argument that the concept *normative reason*_{NEUT} just *is* the concept *normative reason*_{EXT}. The thing is: Such a “conceptual truth,” if it indeed ends up being one, is inevitably going to be *non-obvious*. As a result, it would seem that any successful argument for this “conceptual truth” could equally well be pitched as a substantive normative argument that starts from the assumption that there are normative reasons_{NEUT} of roughly the kinds we think there are, and shows us how we are inevitably forced to the conclusion that there are *robustly attitude-independent* normative reasons_{NEUT}. In other words, it seems to me that the distinction between (1) a substantive normative argument concerning whether there are robustly attitude-independent normative reasons_{NEUT} and (2) an argument that the concept

*normative reason*_{NEUT} must ultimately be understood as the concept *normative reason*_{EXT}—that deploying the one concept commits you to deploying the latter—is always going to break down in the end. They’re going to be two different ways of talking about what is ultimately the same basic question. What is crucial, in my view, is just that we not get confused and waffle between them in the midst of argument. As I discuss below, this is what happens, in my view, when Parfit makes some of the objections he does to my “evolutionary debunking” argument that there are no robustly attitude-independent reasons. The general form of my argument is to start with the assumption that there are normative reasons (i.e., normative reasons_{NEUT}) of roughly the kind that we think there are—i.e., to start from a non-skeptical position about the existence of normative reasons—and then try to show how the thesis that there are *robustly attitude-independent* normative reasons is actually incompatible with that non-skeptical assumption—because (so I argue, anyway) that thesis yields the result that we are probably wildly mistaken about what normative reasons there are.

¹² I discuss some relevant terminological points in “What Is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?”, *Philosophy Compass* 5 (2010); “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Rethink It,” unpublished manuscript; and “In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference.”

¹³ I say more about my take on quasi-realism in “Mind-Independence Without the Mystery: Why Quasi-Realists Can’t Have It Both Ways,” in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 6, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011). [I plan to say more in later drafts about where I think quasi-realism fits into all this. But my view is that robust attitude-independence may be understood as a substantive normative position that is defeated on substantive normative grounds. So quasi-realists have not earned their right to make robustly realist-sounding claims any more than the non-naturalist realists have. We can go ahead and voice such claims, of course, but we must regard all such claims as strictly speaking false (though quite possibly pragmatically justified), whereas the same is *not* true of many everyday normative claims.]

¹⁴ In “In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference.”

¹⁵ [Reference.]

¹⁶ See again “In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference.”

¹⁷ See *OWM*, I, 109, where Parfit briefly acknowledges that metaethical considerations might be what push many people to subjectivism (which Parfit understands as a substantive normative position).