

Does Normative Anti-Realism Entail Nihilism?

By
Vaughn Papenhausen

An undergraduate thesis submitted to

Haverford College in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Bachelor of Arts in

Philosophy

Readers: Jerry Miller, Brooks

Sommerville

April 27th, 2018

Abstract:

Derek Parfit argues that normative anti-realism, the thesis that all normative truths are dependent on our normative attitudes, is a form of Nihilism, the thesis that nothing matters. I shall argue that Parfit is right: normative anti-realism is a form of Nihilism, in the sense that it entails Nihilism. I shall then argue, more tentatively, that this fact is grounds for us to reject anti-realism.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to Dylan Wheeler, who pushed my metaethical beliefs to the breaking point, and without whose incisive criticism I would never have felt the need to interrogate my metaethical convictions so deeply, and to my parents, Mark and Amy Papenhausen, who encouraged me to make my own choices and follow my dreams, and who never complained, even when they found out I wanted to major in philosophy.

I owe debts of gratitude to my thesis advisors, Jerry Miller and Brooks Sommerville, without whose feedback this thesis would look very different indeed. Thanks to Jerry for keeping this project's metaphorical feet on the ground, and to Brooks for incisive commentary and suggestions at every stage.

Thanks also to Joel Yurdin, whose introductory philosophy course piqued my interest in philosophy and whose early encouragement led me to continue, and to Michael Huemer (though we've never met), whose work convinced me that philosophy didn't have to be dry and boring.

I am also grateful to Questbridge, and for the financial generosity of Haverford College, without which I would not have been able to study at this institution.

I. Introduction

Normative anti-realism is the view that there are no robustly attitude-independent normative truths. As I'll explain in more detail below, this means, roughly, that what a person should do is determined by what they would *think* they should do in certain, extremely idealized, conditions ("normative truths" are truths about what we should do, in a broad sense that includes non-moral as well as moral "shoulds"). In his *On What Matters*,¹ Derek Parfit argues that this position is a "form of Nihilism,"² the view that nothing matters. In fact, he argues that *all* alternatives to his own, quite specific, metaethical position are close to Nihilism. As one of Parfit's philosophical opponents so aptly put it, he "believes that the only genuine alternative to his position is [N]ihilism, more or less well disguised."³

Both these claims are disputed by Parfit's critics. Sharon Street and Larry Temkin both attempt to defuse the threat of Nihilism by appealing to the concept of "mattering to" beings like us. Street, a staunch anti-realist, writes:

To matter is to matter from the point of view of someone ... 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."⁴

Temkin, whose sympathies lie with Parfit's steadfast realism, writes:

¹ *On What Matters* is divided into three volumes. Hereafter, I will cite the three volumes as OWM I, OWM II, and OWM III respectively.

² OWM III, 264.

³ Street (2017), 121.

⁴ Street (2017), 121.

The fact that [some things] matter *to* us is not up for debate. They do. This is enough, seemingly, to ground the claim that some things do indeed matter, even if ... they only matter in the sense that, and because of the fact that, they matter to creatures like us ... Parfit may be correct that if his ... view of normativity is mistaken, then *nothing matters* in *his* sense. And I for one would ... be very disappointed if ... nothing mattered in his sense. But Parfit's sense is *not* the only possible sense of "not mattering" that is meaningful and significant; so, even *if* nothing mattered in *Parfit's* sense, it wouldn't follow that nihilism was true, and that nothing mattered *simpliciter*.⁵

Temkin suggests that "there may be a spectrum of ways of 'mattering'," and that "between such extreme positions [Parfit's view and Nihilism] many other positions are ... possible."⁶

Parfit vigorously opposes such attempts to set up "mattering to someone" as a legitimate alternative to his conception of "mattering." He argues that mattering to someone is not a way of mattering, since to say that something matters to someone is just to say that someone cares about that thing. And this is merely a psychological claim, while Parfit's claims about mattering are meant to be completely independent of people's psychologies. For something to *matter*, for Parfit, is not merely for someone to care about it, but for someone to have *reason* to care about it. He writes:

[W]hen Nihilists claim that nothing matters, they don't mean that no one cares about anything. That claim would be obviously false. Nihilists mean that no one has any reasons to care about anything. If we had no such reasons, Nihilists would be right. Nothing would matter in any significant normative sense.⁷

⁵ Temkin (2017), 27.

⁶ *Ibid*, 33-4.

⁷ OWM III, 315.

In this thesis, I will argue that Parfit is right: anti-realism is a form of Nihilism, and the fact that many things “matter to” people in no way changes this. To make this claim easier to refer to, I shall label it:

(P) Anti-realism, the thesis that there are no robustly attitude-independent normative truths, entails Nihilism, the thesis that nothing matters.⁸

I shall also, more tentatively, argue that because (P) is true, we should reject anti-realism.

II. Setting the Stage

Since the realism/anti-realism debate is framed in terms of much often-ambiguous jargon, it is worth taking the time to clarify several key terms and distinctions, both for the benefit of those who are not familiar with them, and so that those who are familiar with them will know exactly how I shall understand them here. Unless otherwise specified, my intention is to follow the usage of Parfit and Street (unless these diverge).

First, what is meant by “normative”? As the word is usually used in metaethics, normative truths are the truths we talk about using words such as good, right, must, ought, have (a) reason, count in favor, valuable, etc., and it’s often thought that a normative term can only be defined through other normative terms. A key intuition that any account of the normative should capture is that normative truths are supposed to *guide action*; they’re supposed to tell us what to do, or what we should do. Parfit thinks that normativity is best thought of in terms of *reasons*. I shall remain neutral on the issue of whether normativity is best understood in terms of reasons, value, or obligations (or something else), but I will follow Parfit in mostly phrasing my claims in terms of reasons.

⁸ As I shall point out later, there are in fact two versions of Nihilism; the one I shall use throughout most of this thesis is the “narrow” version, the thesis that nothing matters; the “wide” version says that there are no reasons full stop.

The best articulation of the relevant sense of “reasons” that I know of is T.M. Scanlon’s formulation from his book *What We Owe To Each Other*:

I will take the idea of a reason as a 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 ...”⁹

Reasons in this sense can be reasons for belief or reasons for action, and reasons for action encompass both self-interested (“prudential”) and moral reasons. (Crucially, as we shall see later, we can also have, in this sense of the word, reasons *to care* about certain things. I shall treat these as a subset of reasons for action.)

Reasons in this broad sense are usually called “normative reasons” or “reasons in the standard normative sense,” but they might also usefully be called “justifying reasons” in order to contrast them with “explanatory” and “motivating” reasons.¹⁰ An explanatory reason gives the *causal history* behind one’s action—for example, if I cluck like a chicken because I have been hypnotized to do so, the fact that I have been hypnotized explains why I am clucking, but it can’t plausibly be said either to *motivate* me to do so, or to *justify* me in doing so. A motivating reason gives one’s *motivation* for one’s own action. For example, if I decide not to work on my term paper in order to go to a party, then my motivating reason for not working on my paper is to go to the party. All motivating reasons are explanatory reasons, but not all explanatory reasons are motivating reasons, as the hypnosis example shows. But the relevant contrast is between *both* of these and *justifying* (or normative) reasons. Whether motivating and justifying reasons ever come apart is disputed, but if they do, an example of how they do is the following: suppose I am

⁹ Scanlon (1998), 17.

¹⁰ Markovits (2014), 2.

in agony, but I have no desire for the agony to cease. Though I have no motivating reason to get the agony to stop, I plausibly have a justifying reason to do so (namely, the nature of agony is simply such that I ought to want to make it stop). In any case, the notion of a justifying, or “normative,” reason is the one I want to zero in on. Here are some further potential examples of normative reasons, some more controversial than others:

Burning Hotel: If your hotel is burning, that fact gives you a reason to jump out of your window into the freezing canal below (OWM II, 283).

Agony: If you are in excruciating agony, that fact gives you a reason to try to make the agony stop (OWM I, 74).

Agony II: If someone *else* is in excruciating agony, that fact gives you a reason to try to alleviate that agony.

Lightning: If you see lightning, that fact gives you a reason to believe you will soon hear thunder.

One reason it’s controversial whether normative and motivating reasons ever come apart is because some people are *anti-realists* about normativity: they believe that all normativity crucially depends on our normative attitudes. (Realists, of course, believe that normativity is, at least sometimes, *independent* of our normative attitudes.) Exactly *how* normativity depends (or not) on our attitudes is a subtle matter.¹¹

Everyone, realist and anti-realist alike, agrees that normative truths must be “attitude-independent” in one sense: whatever account of normativity we give, it must be true that we can sometimes be wrong about what reasons we have. That is, all theories of normativity must be able to account for the fact that we sometimes make *mistakes* about our reasons. Where realists

¹¹ Of course there is disagreement within the anti-realist camp about this question. The explanation I shall give follows Street’s version of the distinction.

and anti-realists differ is whether any reasons are *robustly* attitude-independent. Anti-realists can accommodate modest attitude-independence, but not robust attitude-independence. So what does it mean for normative properties to be “robustly attitude-independent”? This boils down to *when* people can be wrong about their normative judgements: the two normally only come apart in certain highly idealized circumstances. For anti-realists, there are certain circumstances in which people *cannot* make normative mistakes. Consider the case of

Gin and Tonic: Peter has a hankering for a gin and tonic, so he believes that he has a reason to mix the liquid on the bar in front of him with the tonic in his hand and drink it.

However, unbeknownst to him, the liquid on the bar is not gin, but petrol.¹²

Clearly, Peter has no reason to mix the petrol with the tonic and drink it, even though he believes that he does. Thus, the normative truth that Peter has no reason to make and drink this mixture is, at least, *modestly attitude-independent*.

However, imagine now that Peter *wants* a petrol-and-tonic, so that if he found out that the liquid in front of him was petrol, he would still want to drink it. Furthermore, he is unusual in that none of his other desires conflict with this one. Most of us, even if we wanted to drink a petrol-and-tonic, would be mistaken in wanting this, because it would conflict with other desires of ours, such as our desire to remain healthy or our desire not to drink things that taste bad. But Peter, it happens, doesn't have any of these other desires that most of us have; all of his desires are perfectly compatible with wanting to drink petrol-and-tonic. If, at this point, you think Peter would no longer have a reason not to drink the petrol-and-tonic, then you think that his reason was *merely* modestly attitude-independent; if, on the other hand, you think that Peter still has a

¹² Example adapted from Williams (1981), 102.

reason not to drink the petrol-and-tonic, then you think his reason is *robustly* attitude-independent. The distinction, then, is this: a normative truth is

modestly attitude-independent if an agent can be mistaken about it by being mistaken about the normative facts or by having internally inconsistent values, and it is *robustly attitude-independent* if an agent can be mistaken about it *even when* they have made *no* such non-normative mistakes and have *no* such internal inconsistencies.

I can now state the distinction between realism and anti-realism.

Realism holds that there are at least some robustly attitude-independent truths.¹³

Anti-realism holds that there are *no* robustly attitude-independent truths (though it is open to the anti-realist to hold that there are *modestly* attitude-independent truths).

III. Why Anti-Realism Entails That Nothing Matters

As I have said, in this thesis I shall argue that

(P) If there are no robustly attitude-independent normative truths, then nothing matters. In other words, anti-realism entails Nihilism.¹⁴

There are two ways one might argue for this conclusion: one might argue that it's true as a *conceptual* matter, or as a *substantive* matter. To explain the distinction, I'll begin by directly quoting Parfit:

Some normative claim is

conceptual or *linguistic* when this claim is about some normative concept, or the meaning of some normative word or phrase.

¹³ Following Street, Nonnaturalists, some Naturalists, and Expressivist Quasi-Realists all count as realists for the purposes of this thesis. For the fact that Quasi-Realists count as realists for Street, see Street (2017), n. 10.

¹⁴ Again, Parfit argues for the stronger conclusion that, not only anti-realism, but *all* alternatives to his view, are forms of Nihilism. I shall remain neutral as to whether this stronger conclusion also holds. In particular, I leave it open whether Quasi-Realism and realist forms of Naturalism are forms of Nihilism (see n. 13).

One example is the claim that ‘morally permitted’ means ‘not wrong’. Some normative claim is

substantive when this claim both

(a) states that something has some normative property,

and

(b) is *significant*, by being a claim with which we might disagree, or which might be informative, by telling us something that we didn’t already know.

One example is the claim that

(1) illegal acts are wrong.

Some other normative claims are *tautologies*, in the sense that these claims tell us only that something is what it is, or that, if something has some property this thing has this property.¹⁵

To see the distinction, consider act utilitarianism, the claim that the right action is the action which maximizes expected utility. There are (at least) two distinct ways someone might defend act utilitarianism. First, they might claim that “right action” *means* “action which maximizes expected utility.” This is the conceptual reading. On this reading, if I claim that it’s *right* to switch the tracks in the Trolley Problem, that’s just the same thing as claiming that switching the tracks maximizes expected utility; it would be *nonsensical*, and a contradiction in terms, to claim both that switching the tracks maximizes expected utility, and that it wasn’t right. On the other hand, they might claim that all acts which maximize expected utility are right and vice versa, but still maintain that it’s not nonsensical to think otherwise. People who think that, say, acts which

¹⁵ OWM II, 275.

obey the Categorical Imperative are right aren't *contradicting themselves*, they're just *mistaken*.

To see the distinction even more clearly, imagine a conversation which goes like this:

Alice: What's the right thing to do in the Trolley problem?

Bob: To switch the tracks.

Alice: Why?

Bob: Because it maximizes expected utility.

Alice: But that's just *another way of saying what you said before*. I already know that *if* it's right to switch the tracks, then switching the tracks maximizes expected utility—those are just the same thing. Saying that something maximizes expected utility isn't a reason why it's right, it's just a restatement of the claim *that* it's right. What *I* was asking was whether switching the tracks really *does* maximize expected utility. Why would you think that telling me that switching the tracks maximizes expected utility would *convince me* that it was right?

Bob: No... When I said that switching the tracks would maximize expected utility, I wasn't intending to *restate* the thought that switching the tracks is right, I was intending to *give the reason* why it is right. Now of course you're right that merely claiming that it maximizes expected utility shouldn't convince you that it does maximize expected utility; I would further need to argue that it does this for my argument to be complete. But suppose I could do that. Since we're both act utilitarians, we agree that that would be enough to establish that switching the tracks is right. But we appear to disagree about *why*. Let me give some examples to illustrate. You think that "the action that maximizes expected utility is right" is true in the same way that " $5 + 5 = 10$ " is true. " $5 + 5$ " is just another way of *writing* "10"; they *mean* the exact same thing. I, on the other hand, think

that “the action that maximizes expected utility is right” is true in the same way that “Superman is Clark Kent” is true. While “Superman” and “Clark Kent” *refer* to the same object in reality (namely a particular person who works at the Daily Planet, sometimes wears glasses, sometimes wears a cape, and often saves Lois Lane from evil villains), they clearly *mean* two different things. “Superman” means “the person who wears blue and red tights and a cape, can leap over tall buildings in a single bound ...” and so on, while “Clark Kent” means “the person who works at the Daily Planet, wears glasses, is usually not noticed by Lois Lane ...” and so on. These clearly *mean* different things, it just so happens that they *refer* to the *same* person.¹⁶ That is, I don’t think that “maximizing expected utility” and “right” *mean* the same thing, even though I think that all acts that are right maximize expected utility and all acts that maximize expected utility are right.

In this dialogue, Alice thinks that act utilitarianism is true as a *conceptual* matter, while Bob thinks it is true as a *substantive* matter.

Borrowing a phrase from Julia Markovits, another way of stating the difference is this: conceptual claims (about reasons) are claims about “*what reasons are,*” while substantive claims are claims about “*what reasons there are.*”¹⁷ So, (P) could be true in one of two ways. First, it could be true in virtue of *what reasons are*, that is, in the same way that that “parents have children” is true¹⁸—someone who thinks that one can be a parent and yet have never had any

¹⁶ I’m glossing over a large debate in the philosophy of language here.

¹⁷ Markovits (2014), 2. Emphasis in original.

¹⁸ This example is drawn from Street (2008), 227-28, though there it is used to make a slightly different point. Also, it might be objected that one could be a parent even if one *currently* has no children, if one has previously had children who died. But the example could easily be modified to accommodate this worry, by saying “parents have, or have had, children” (where “have children” is understood to include not only biological children, but also adoptive children).

children seems not to understand what it is to be a parent, so perhaps someone who thinks (P) is false simply doesn't understand what it is to be a reason. Second, it could be true in virtue of *what reasons there are*; perhaps, though it's conceptually *possible* that things matter on an anti-realist picture, as a matter of fact they do not.

In her essay "Nothing 'Really' Matters (But That's Not What Matters)" Street argues that (P) can't be defended on purely conceptual grounds. Street distinguishes between:¹⁹

Reasons_{INT}: A concept of normative reasons which includes in its definition that nothing is a reason for an agent unless it is connected²⁰ to that agent's "subjective motivational set" (the set of that agent's motivations, evaluative attitudes, etc).

Reasons_{EXT}: A concept of normative reasons which includes in its definition not only that agents *can* have reasons that are unconnected to their motivational sets, but that there *are* some such reasons.

Reasons_{NEUT}: A concept of a normative reason which is *neutral* on the question of whether normative reasons need be connected with an agent's subjective motivational set. On this conception, there may be some reasons that are unconnected to an agent's subjective motivational set, or there may not be. According to Street, this is the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense as defined above.

She then claims that Parfit often conflates the concept of a reason in the standard normative sense (*reason_{NEUT}*) with the concept of a *reason_{EXT}*, and leading him to "hear[] any denial of the existence of *external reasons* [reasons unconnected to an agent's motivations] as a denial of the existence of *reasons*."²¹ But because these concepts are actually distinct, there is at least

¹⁹ Street (2017), 131-32.

²⁰ I leave it intentionally ambiguous what this "connection" consists in.

²¹ Street (2017), 132-33.

conceptual room to affirm the existence of *reasons* while denying the existence of external reasons. One cannot argue on the basis of *what reasons are* that there are external reasons. Likewise, according to Street, one can't argue that external reasons are conceptually *impossible*. But, she says, “[t]o agree that there is no *conceptually necessary* tie between normative reasons and motivation is of course not to agree that *there is no tie*.”²² What Street wants to argue is that, on *substantive* grounds,²³ there are no robustly attitude-independent reasons. That is to say, though it is conceptually *possible* for there to be such reasons, as a matter of fact there are none.²⁴ Parfit, it turns out, agrees that this debate is best viewed as a substantive normative one.²⁵

The argument I shall advance in this paper, however, is primarily a conceptual one.²⁶ I have expanded it from an argument Parfit makes in passing in several places in *On What Matters*,²⁷ but does not adequately defend. It runs as follows:

- (1) If there are no reasons to care about things, then nothing matters.
- (2) All reasons to care are object-given reasons.²⁸
- (3) All object-given reasons are robustly attitude-independent.
- (4) From (1), (2), and (3): if there are no robustly attitude-independent reasons, then
nothing matters

²² Ibid, 131.

²³ Which in Street's case are primarily epistemological. According to Street, because our normative beliefs have been strongly influenced by evolution, if there were normative truths that were robustly independent of our attitudes in the way the realist posits, it would be vanishingly unlikely that we could know these truths. But since we clearly do have much normative knowledge, normative truths must not be robustly attitude-independent. See Street (2006) for Street's exposition of this argument.

²⁴ Though as Street is careful to emphasize, there are certainly many *modestly* attitude-independent reasons.

²⁵ OWM III, 259.

²⁶ Though this is complicated; see Section VI.

²⁷ Parfit's version of the argument essentially encompasses only Premise 1. See e.g. OWM I, 107 and OWM III, 47 & 315. Also, Street herself cannot be faulted for not responding to this argument, since some of its key pieces are first articulated in OWM III.

²⁸ Later I'll explain in more detail what "object-given reasons" are.

(5) Definition: Anti-realism is the view that there are no (robustly) attitude-independent reasons.

(6) Conclusion, from (4) and (5): If Anti-realism is true, then nothing matters.

In the next few sections, I'll consider premises (1) – (4), and argue that all of them are true. Since (5) is Street's own definition of anti-realism, and (6) follows from (4) and (5), if I can argue that (1) – (4) are true, that will be sufficient to prove (6).

It would make little sense for me to discuss in detail whether my argument is conceptual or substantive and why this matters before I have laid out the argument itself. Therefore, I delay this discussion until Section VI.

IV. Reasons to Care

In Part One of *On What Matters*, Parfit distinguishes between *object-given* reasons and *subject-given* reasons. Object-given reasons are “provided by the facts that make certain outcomes worth producing or preventing, or make certain things worth doing for their own sake.”²⁹ In other words, they are reasons we have in virtue of the *intrinsic features* of certain actions or states of affairs, features which make these actions or states of affairs valuable. Subject-given reasons are reasons we have in virtue of “certain facts about what would fulfil or achieve [either] our present desires or aims, ... [or] the desires or aims that we would now have ... if we had carefully considered all of the relevant facts.”³⁰ In other words, subject-given reasons are given by our own desires.

Parfit gives several arguments for the conclusion that *all* reasons are object-given.³¹

However, for space reasons, I cannot deal with these here, so I'll assume for the sake of

²⁹ OWM I, 45.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See Sections 11-14 in OWM I: “The Agony Argument”; “The All or None Argument”; “The Incoherence Argument”; and “Reasons, Motives, and Well-Being.”

argument that they all fail, and that there might be subject-given reasons. I'll focus on a particular subset of object-given reasons, *reasons to care*,³² and argue that they're essential for things to matter.

Now, our desires can clearly give us reasons in one way. For example, if I want to do well on some test, and the best way to do so is to study for this test, then these facts give me a reason to study for this test. But, Parfit claims, this is only true if I also have a good reason to *want to do well on the test*.³³ Perhaps I want to do well on the test in order to pass the class the test is for. But again, this only gives me a reason to want to pass the test if I also have a good reason to want to pass the class. And such a line of thought can continue until we reach the end of the chain of desires. Parfit calls the desires at the end of such chains "telic desires."³⁴ The point at issue between Objectivists and Subjectivists is this: if the chain ends at some desire which we have no reason to have, can that desire give us a reason (which can then ground all the other reasons in the chain)? In other words, can our merely *caring* about something give us a reason, even if we have no *reason to care* about that thing? Objectivists claim that a desire we have no reason to have cannot give us reasons; the only way *any* desire in such a chain gives us a reason is if the chain ends, not in a desire that we have no reason to have, but a *reason to care* about what we desire, a reason given by some fact *about* the object of our desire. So, returning to our test case, let's fill out the chain of reasons: I want to pass the class in order to graduate college, I want to graduate college in order to avoid disappointing my parents, and I want to avoid disappointing my parents in order to avoid the emotional pain that disappointing my

³² One might accuse me of begging the question on premise (2) above by framing these as a subset of object-given reasons. But below, in Section V, I'll explicitly examine the possibility that there might be non-object-given reasons to care.

³³ OWM I, 59-60.

³⁴ Ibid, 44.

parents would cause me.³⁵ A Subjectivist would say that my desire to avoid this pain gives me a reason to avoid it, and therefore grounds the other reasons in the chain, even if I have no reason to want to avoid the pain.³⁶ An Objectivist would claim that I *do* have a reason to want to avoid the pain, because the nature of pain gives me a reason to want to avoid it, and that *this* is what grounds the chain and gives me a reason to study, pass the test, etc. Phrased in terms of mattering: a Subjectivist would say that I have a reason to avoid this emotional pain because it *matters to me* to avoid this pain, while an Objectivist would say that, because I have a reason to avoid this pain, *avoiding this pain matters*.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, Larry Temkin argues that it is enough for things to matter that they matter *to us*:

The fact that [some things] matter *to us* is not up for debate. They do. This is enough, seemingly, to ground the claim that some things do indeed matter, even if ... they only matter in the sense that, and because of the fact that, they matter to creatures like us ... Parfit may be correct that if his ... view of normativity is mistaken, then *nothing matters* in *his* sense. And I for one would ... be very disappointed if ... nothing mattered in his sense. But Parfit's sense is *not* the only possible sense of "not mattering" that is meaningful and significant; so, even *if* nothing mattered in *Parfit's* sense, it wouldn't follow that nihilism was true, and that nothing mattered *simpliciter*.³⁷

So, even though Temkin believes that things matter in Parfit's sense, he thinks that even *if* nothing mattered in Parfit's sense, things would still matter, because they matter *to us*.

³⁵ This example is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

³⁶ By ending the justificatory chain with pain I in no way mean to imply that pain and pleasure are the *only* things that can give us reasons; in fact, Parfit explicitly rejects this thought (OWM I, 44-45).

³⁷ Temkin (2017), 27.

However, Temkin's argument seems to be based, in part, on a matter of mere language, playing on the fact that the phrase "matter to" contains the word "matter." That something "matters to" someone is another way of saying that this person *cares about* that thing.³⁸ So, the point at issue is whether our merely *caring about* something can make it *matter*. And while it sounds suggestive to say that something's "mattering to" someone can make it matter, to say that someone's *caring about* something can make it matter is, at least, less obvious.

I think there are two ways to understand Temkin's point that our caring about things can make them matter. The first is that our caring about certain things might be *what it is* for those things to matter.³⁹ But this doesn't seem right. Parfit argues as follows:

[W]hen Nihilists claim that nothing matters, they don't mean that no one cares about anything. That claim would be obviously false. Nihilists mean that no one has any reasons to care about anything. If we had no such reasons, Nihilists would be right. Nothing would matter in any significant normative sense.⁴⁰

Though Parfit frames the point in terms of what Nihilists *in fact* believe, it's perhaps better framed in terms of what Nihilists *can* consistently believe. If our caring about things were what mattering consists in, then Nihilists, who claim that *nothing* matters, would need to deny that we care about anything, otherwise their argument would be a nonstarter. But Nihilists *don't* need to deny that we care about things. Therefore, our caring about things can't be what mattering consists in.⁴¹

³⁸ OWM I, 107.

³⁹ This is the way in which I think Temkin intends his argument to be understood (see e.g. Temkin 2017, 27). Also note that this need not be what it is for *all* things to matter; perhaps there are several ways of mattering, of which our caring about something is only one.

⁴⁰ OWM III, 315.

⁴¹ This isn't strictly true. Suppose mattering *did* consist in our caring about things. It might be that Nihilists claim that it doesn't, and they're simply mistaken.

What, then, *does* mattering consist in? Parfit's answer is that mattering consists in our having *reasons* to care about certain things. But why think this? Parfit doesn't answer this question, but I think an answer can be found in a kind of *closed question argument*. Consider the following statements:

- (A) I have reason to care about x , but x doesn't matter.
- (B) x matters, but I have no reason to care about x .
- (C) We have reason to care about some things, but nothing matters.
- (D) Some things matter, but we have no reason to care about anything.

To my ear at least, all of these statements sound about as contradictory as "This is a cat, but it isn't a mammal," and non-philosophers whom I've asked have said that while they can get the sentences to make sense in the right context, there is something off about them.⁴² This indicates that "we have reason to care about" and "matter" express the same concept, similar to G. E. Moore's "open question argument" but in reverse. Moore said that, for any proposed reduction of "good," we can always ask, "yes, A is x , but is it *good*?"⁴³ and that this shows that no proposed reduction of "good" is actually identical to "good." My argument works similarly, but instead of claiming that all questions of this kind are *open*, I claim that there is a reduction⁴⁴ of " x matters" which produces *closed* questions, namely "we have reason to care about x ."⁴⁵ So "if there are no reasons to care about things, then nothing matters," is an analytic truth.

V. Object-Given Reasons

⁴² Perhaps this is like pointing at a pencil sketch of a cat and saying, "this is a cat, but it isn't a mammal."

⁴³ As an example: "yes, A is pleasurable, but is it *good*?"

⁴⁴ Though this is only a reduction in the way that "consideration that counts in favor" is a reduction of "normative reason." It is a statement with the same meaning, but not one that reduces the normative term "matters" to something outside the realm of the normative, since "reason to care" is also a normative term.

⁴⁵ I've used statements instead of questions, but the point remains.

The second way of understanding Temkin's argument⁴⁶ is this: perhaps our caring about something might, at least in some cases, *give* us a reason to care about it, and cause it to matter in that sense. In other words, perhaps some reasons to care are not object-given, because they are given not by something's intrinsic features, but by the fact that someone cares about that thing. Before we examine this possibility, note that the argument from what Nihilists can consistently claim applies here as well: if caring could provide reasons to care, then Nihilists would need to deny that anyone cares about anything in order to claim that nothing matters; since they need not do this, we can conclude that caring cannot provide a reason to care.

Even if this argument fails, however, it's still not the case that caring about something can provide a reason to care about it. This is because, if it did, caring would be self-justifying in a problematic way, as I shall now argue.

There are three possibilities: either caring *always* provides a reason to care, or it *never* does, or it does in some cases but not others. It's not plausible that caring is always self-justifying, because there are clear cases where it isn't. For example, if I care about preserving the environment, this does not by itself give me a *reason* to care about preserving the environment. To be clear, this doesn't by itself imply that caring cannot provide *any* reasons⁴⁷ (caring about the environment might provide one with a reason to recycle, for instance), only that caring about something cannot provide a reason to *care about that thing*.

If there are some cases where caring is not self-justifying, then one reason to think that it is *never* self-justifying is that if it were only sometimes self-justifying, it would not be clear, on an anti-realist picture, how to distinguish the cases where it is self-justifying from the cases

⁴⁶ Though, I think, not the way he intended it; see n. 40.

⁴⁷ Though Parfit thinks this is true as well; see n. 32 above.

where it is not.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, one might object, there do intuitively seem to be cases where caring is self-justifying. For example, if I commit to a project, then plausibly the very fact that I've committed to the project gives me some reason to continue to work on it.⁴⁹ So, since we have cases on both sides, it seems that caring might sometimes, though not always, be self-justifying. And this would be enough to defeat my argument, since if there could be some attitude-dependent reasons to care, then some things might matter (*simpliciter*) attitude-dependently, and so some things would matter even under anti-realism.

There are several ways of replying to this objection. First, we can question whether the case is a genuine example of self-justifying caring. First: for clarity's sake, suppose that all my original reasons for caring about the project no longer apply. I think that the intuition that I still have a reason to continue the project does not result merely from the fact that I *care* (or more accurately, "cared") about the project, but from the fact that I committed to do it, *combined with a general duty to keep commitments*. Note also that this duty gives me a reason to *continue working on the project*, but not a reason to *continue caring about the project*; I have a reason to work on the project whether or not I care about it anymore. And if we imagine this general duty away as well, it becomes far from clear that I really *do* still have a reason to continue working on the project, let alone to continue caring about it. Of course I can't enumerate and respond to every putative example of self-justifying caring, but it's plausible that other examples can be defused in a similar fashion.

Second, even if I grant that caring can sometimes provide a reason to care, it seems the number of cases in which it can do so is quite small. Even if not all of the putative cases can be explained away, many probably will be, as this example illustrates. If this is so, then though the

⁴⁸ Cf. Parfit's All-or-None Argument, OWM I Section 12.

⁴⁹ I am indebted to Joel Yurdin for this objection.

anti-realist would be able to account for *some* things mattering, they would not be able to account for nearly the range of things mattering that we intuitively hold to matter. At that point, we could object to the anti-realist that their position cannot account for all the reasons we intuitively think we have.

Another reason it's implausible to think that caring is often self-justifying is that caring is in certain ways similar to belief, and belief is never self-justifying: merely *believing* some proposition *p* could not provide a *reason* to believe that *p*.⁵⁰

There are two ways to object to this claim. First, one might claim that there are in fact some instances of self-justifying beliefs. For example, I believe that human reason evolved to allow us to win arguments, not to allow us to find the truth. But I don't remember, off the top of my head, any of the arguments that lead me to adopt this belief. Nevertheless, the fact that I believe it, and remember having had reasons to believe it, even if I don't remember any of those reasons now, might be thought to itself give me a reason to believe it (though this may or may not be enough to *justify* me in believing it).⁵¹ But here I think my reason for believing this is not merely that I do believe it, but that I believe it *and remember having had reasons to believe it*. So this is not an instance of self-justifying belief, though it appears to be, because it is not *merely* my belief, but also my memory, that justifies me. Something similar might be said of the following case: Mr. Spock believes that there are 50 doors on the starship *Enterprise*, though he doesn't remember why he believes this, nor even ever having any reason for believing it. But Spock knows that he only believes things with good reason; so, because he believes this, he knows that he must have good reason to believe it. Here again, I think it's not merely Spock's

⁵⁰ Again, in claiming this I don't need to claim that only epistemic reasons can be reasons to believe something; all I need to claim is that *believing p* cannot be a reason to believe *p*.

⁵¹ I'm indebted to Brooks Sommerville for this objection, and for the following similar objection.

belief, but his belief *combined with particular knowledge about himself*, that gives him a reason to believe that there are 50 doors on the *Enterprise*.

Second, one might object that the analogy fails because belief is actually different from caring in a crucial respect: belief has a “mind-to-world” direction of fit, while caring has a “world-to-mind” direction of fit: when I find out that my beliefs differ from reality, the natural response is to try to change my beliefs to match reality, while when I find out that reality differs from what I care about, the natural response is to try to change reality so that it’s more like what I care about.⁵² This, so the objection goes, explains why beliefs can’t be self-justifying but caring sometimes can be. Since beliefs have a mind-to-world direction of fit, the kinds of things that provide reasons for belief are *states of the world*; beliefs themselves just *aren’t the type of thing* that provides reasons for belief, so a belief simply can’t be self-justifying. On the other hand, since caring has a *world-to-mind* direction of fit, it’s not clear what kinds of things even *could* provide reasons to care about things, what sort of standard one’s personal values could be held up against. Parfit’s answer is that reasons to care about things are provided by the *value* inherent in certain events, the fact that certain events are *worth caring about*. But this account would make caring have a *mind-to-world* direction of fit, insofar as that value is construed to be part of the mind-independent world. What this means is that if caring *does* have a world-to-mind direction of fit, and this means that there can’t be reasons to care about things, this would imply, by premise (1), that nothing matters. So, if caring has a world-to-mind direction of fit, we’ve found, not that caring can be self-justifying, but that it cannot be justified at all.

VI. Robustly Attitude-independent Reasons

⁵² Again, I am indebted to Brooks Sommerville for this objection.

I've now argued that nothing matters unless there are reasons to care about things, and that all reasons to care about things are object-given. But for all that, it could still be that there are reasons to care, even on an anti-realist picture, if some object-given reasons (in particular, reasons to care) might be attitude-dependent.⁵³ Therefore, in this section I'll argue that on an anti-realist view, there are no object-given reasons (premise 3 above).

In his reply to Street in Volume Three of *On What Matters*, Parfit notes that Street assumes she must defend Subjectivism in order to defend anti-realism, but claims that his Subjectivism-Objectivism distinction is separate from Street's realism-antirealism distinction, such that one might coherently hold any one of the following positions:

(SA) Subjectivist anti-realism

(SR) Subjectivist realism

(OA) Objectivist anti-realism

(OR) Objectivist realism

Street currently defends (SA), and Parfit (OR). To see why these two distinctions are independent, note that (SR) is clearly a coherent position. It could be true attitude-independently that what each person has most reason to do depends fundamentally on that person's own attitudes.⁵⁴ According to Parfit

[Subjectivist realists] would claim that, though all practical reasons are given by facts about how we might fulfil our present desires, it is not we who, with our attitudes, make it true that these facts give us reasons. According to these realist Subjectivists, we would cease to have these desire-based reasons if we ceased to have these desires. But these

⁵³ Where, as before, modestly attitude-independent reasons count as attitude-dependent.

⁵⁴ Though this position seems *implausible*—especially since the realist isn't forced to bite these sorts of bullets in quite the same way the anti-realist seems to be—it's certainly *coherent*.

facts about desire-fulfilment would not cease to give us reasons if we ceased to regard these facts as giving us reasons.⁵⁵

As an example, it might be true attitude-independently that what Peter has most reason to do is to drink the petrol-and-tonic because what Peter has most attitude-independent reason to do is whatever he would in fact do after ideal deliberation (rather than, say, what would promote the greatest good of the greatest number), and what Peter would do after ideal deliberation is drink the petrol-and-tonic. Even on this theory, if after ideal deliberation Peter *wouldn't* drink the petrol-and-tonic, then Peter does not now have a reason to drink it. So Peter's reason is in this respect attitude-dependent. But it is in another respect attitude-independent—in the respect that he has, (robustly) attitude-independently, a reason to do *whatever* he would do after ideal deliberation. Since (SR) is clearly coherent, these two distinctions are not identical.

But in order to escape premise (2), Street would need to switch to (OA), *Objectivist anti-realism*. And *pace* Parfit,⁵⁶ just because (SR) is a coherent position it does not follow that (OA) is as well. I claim that (OA) is an incoherent position, because it posits object-given, yet attitude-dependent reasons, and I believe that

(A) If some reason is object-given, then this reason is robustly attitude-independent.

This is just another way of stating our premise (3) from above.

To see why (A) must be true, let us suppose, by way of contradiction, that some person did have an object-given reason that was merely modestly (and not robustly) attitude-independent. For concreteness, let us suppose that Earl has a reason to care about prolonging his life. But it is not *robustly* attitude-independent, which implies that, if he believed he didn't have it, while making *no* mistakes about the non-normative facts or about his other values, he

⁵⁵ OWM III, 262.

⁵⁶ "Just as Subjectivists might be realists, Objectivists might be anti-realists" (OWM III, 262).

wouldn't have this reason. But recall that object-given reasons are supposed to be reasons we have in virtue of the *intrinsic features* of something. In this case, Earl is supposed to have a reason to care about prolonging his life which is *based on the intrinsic features of prolonging one's life*. If the reason is truly based on these features, Earl should only lose this reason if the act of prolonging one's life ceased to have whichever features were relevant. But, by the supposition that this reason is not robustly attitude-independent, Earl *could* lose this reason without this happening, in the event that his attitudes towards life-extension change drastically enough. And Earl's attitudes towards life-extension are not intrinsic features of life-extension. Thus, it seems that object-given reasons must also be robustly attitude-independent, otherwise they will vary based on features that should be irrelevant to object-given reasons. For this reason, the notion of an object-given yet attitude-dependent reason is self-contradictory; thus, all object-given reasons are robustly attitude-independent, which is just premise (3) above.

One might object that I've relied too heavily on the word "intrinsic" here: how are we to determine which features of an object are "intrinsic" and which are not; in particular, how was it determined that Earl's attitudes toward life-extension are not "intrinsic" features of life-extension, and therefore not relevant to Earl's object-given reasons?

But this objection need not be answered. It is often pointless to attempt to give necessary and sufficient conditions for a concept; as proof, the reader is directed to the sprawling and inconclusive literature on the definition of "knowledge." And we have a perfectly good intuitive sense of what "intrinsic" means in this context, and that meaning excludes properties such as "Earl does not care about prolonging his life."

Now that we've established premises 1, 2, and 3, it should be easy to see how the conclusion follows. Since anti-realism claims there are no robustly attitude-independent reasons

(premise 5), and as I have just argued, all object-given reasons are robustly attitude-independent, anti-realism also claims, *a fortiori*, that there are no object-given reasons. By similar reasoning, since all reasons to care are object-given reasons, anti-realism is committed to claiming that there are no reasons to care about anything (these two steps comprise premise 4). And since, as I argued in Section IV, if there are no reasons to care about things then nothing matters, anti-realism entails that nothing matters, which is what we've been trying to show.

Now that the argument has been laid out, I can also discuss whether it is a conceptual or a substantive argument, and why this matters. The arguments for premises (1) and (3) are quite clearly conceptual arguments, as is a peripheral argument for premise (2), but the primary argument for premise (2) is a substantive one, making the status of the argument as a whole rather unclear. Street raises several challenges to her opponents in her paper, one calling for a conceptual argument (“show ... 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 we would have given up on the idea that there are normative reasons at all”⁵⁷) and another calling for a substantive argument (“why [would anyone] hold [the] substantive normative position ... that something doesn't matter unless it matters (robustly) attitude-independently[?]”⁵⁸). The argument I have put forward could be interpreted as an answer to the first: to conclude that there are no *external* (robustly attitude-independent) normative reasons would be to conclude that nothing matters, but that things matter is “a platitude so basic to our normative discourse that we would have given up on the idea that there are normative reasons at all.” Or it could be interpreted as an answer to the second: Someone might believe that something doesn't matter unless it matters robustly attitude-independently because they believe that in order for things to matter, there must be reasons to

⁵⁷ Street (2017), 134.

⁵⁸ Street (2017), 148.

care, which are attitude-independent. My argument doesn't answer either of these challenges perfectly, and I leave it to the reader to decide which, if either, of these challenges my argument best addresses.

VII. In What Sense is Anti-Realism a "Form of Nihilism"?

Now we can also resolve a puzzling apparent contradiction in Parfit's claims about Street's view, and Subjective views in general. In some places, Parfit claims things like: "I believe [Street's] view to be a form of Nihilism, which implies that nothing matters."⁵⁹ But in other places, he writes things like: "Subjectivists are not ... Nihilists, who deny that we have any normative reasons."⁶⁰ But we can now see how these two claims are compatible. When Parfit claims that Subjectivists are not Nihilists, he means that Subjectivists don't make the *same claims* that Nihilists make. They *claim*, and believe, that their views entail that things matter. But when he says that Street's view (and presumably other forms of subjectivism) is a "form of Nihilism," he means that this view *entails* Nihilism, even though to claim that it is true is not *the same* as claiming that Nihilism is true. Subjectivists miss the implications of their view, and so, without realizing it, put forth a "form of Nihilism."

It is also worth noting that Nihilism seems to be used in the literature to refer to at least two distinct positions (though these writers are not careful to distinguish them): the position that *nothing matters* in the sense that we have no reasons to care about anything (I'll call this the "narrow sense"), and the position that there are *no normative reasons at all* (I'll call this the "wide sense").⁶¹ Since I've argued that anti-realism entails that nothing matters, I've argued that

⁵⁹ OWM III, 264.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 261.

⁶¹ The narrow sense is sometimes used by Parfit, in particular at OWM I, 107 and OWM III, 47 & 315, though he also often seems to use the wide sense. In most other places, the wide sense is assumed, often also using the phrase "nothing matters," e.g. Kahane (2016).

it entails Nihilism in the *narrow* sense. But I have not yet argued that anti-realism entails Nihilism in the *wide* sense, since for all I've said it might still be that caring about something can by itself provide us *reasons for action*, even if it doesn't provide us *reasons to care about the thing we care about*. Parfit, I think, believes that anti-realism entails Nihilism in both these senses. I cannot fully argue here that it does entail Nihilism in the wide sense, but I can briefly indicate how such an argument might go. The first step would be to argue, as I have here, that anti-realism entails Nihilism in the *narrow* sense. The second step would be to argue that, as I hinted in Section IV, desires that we have no reason to have cannot give us any reasons. This is exactly what Parfit argues for in Sections 11-14 of *On What Matters*, especially with his *All-or-None Argument*. Given these two conclusions, we can see that if there were no reasons to care about anything, this would deprive us of all reasons for action as well.

VIII. Why Does it Matter That Anti-Realism Entails that Nothing Matters?

As I've said, in this thesis I've argued that

(P) Given anti-realism, nothing matters.

One might at this point wonder, though, why we should care that this is true. Why does it matter that anti-realism entails that nothing matters? The answer, I think, is that it follows from (P) that we should reject anti-realism entirely.

Why should this be so? On the one hand, strictly speaking it only entails that we should reject anti-realism *if* we should reject Nihilism (in the narrow sense). So, if one thinks there are strong independent grounds for rejecting Nihilism, then (P) will speak strongly in favor of rejecting anti-realism as well, but if one is more bullish about Nihilism's prospects, it won't.

On the other hand, there is a way in which (P) speaks in favor of rejecting anti-realism no matter *what* one thinks about Nihilism's prospects: namely, (P) might be thought to imply that

anti-realism isn't really a *distinct position* at all. If Nihilism comes along with anti-realism as a package deal, then it's unclear what's left of anti-realism as a distinctive position. Anti-realism was supposed to be a rival view to *both* realism *and* Nihilism, but it turns out that it's not a rival to Nihilism at all; on the contrary, it entails it. Now, it turns out that Nihilism in the *narrow* sense does not entail anti-realism. Since accepting Nihilism in the narrow sense doesn't commit one to anti-realism, perhaps anti-realism is still a distinct position in this way: since one might accept Nihilism without accepting anti-realism, the two are not necessarily coextensive, and thus not identical positions. On the other hand, Nihilism in the *wide* sense *does* entail anti-realism, since it entails that there are no reasons, and *a fortiori* no robustly attitude-independent reasons. And I've already indicated that anti-realism might entail Nihilism not only in the narrow sense, but also in the wide sense. And if that's true, then anti-realism is true if and only if Nihilism (in the wide sense) is true, which would imply that these two are not in fact distinct positions.

It might be objected that I've mischaracterized anti-realism. Anti-realism, so goes the objection, is not merely the position that

(X) there are no attitude-independent reasons

but the position that

(Y) there are no attitude independent reasons, *and* there *are* attitude-*dependent* reasons.

But this is no defense. If, as I suggested (though did not prove), it's true that

(Z) if there are no robustly attitude-independent reasons, then there are no reasons for action

then anti-realism as characterized by (Y) would be not merely undistinctive, but self-contradictory: it would entail both that there are attitude-dependent reasons (as part of its

definition) and that there are none (following from the claim that there are no robustly attitude-independent reasons).

Parfit argues, though I have not, that not only anti-realism, but all other alternatives to his own metaethical view are also “forms of Nihilism” or “close to Nihilism.” If he is correct in this, then similar considerations to those in this section would lead us to reject those views as well, leaving us with a choice between Parfit’s view and Nihilism. Even if he is wrong, the conclusion that anti-realism is a form of Nihilism is itself significant, especially if, as I have suggested, we are lead to reject anti-realism as a result.

Works Cited

- Kahane, Guy. "If Nothing Matters." *Nous* 51, no. 2 (2016): 327–53.
- Markovits, Julia. *Moral Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Parfit, Derek. *On What Matters*. Vol. 1. 3 vols. Berkeley Tanner Lectures. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- . *On What Matters*. Vol. 2. 3 vols. Berkeley Tanner Lectures. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- . *On What Matters*. E-Book. Vol. 3. 3 vols. Berkeley Tanner Lectures. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Scanlon, T. M. *What We Owe to Each Other*. 1999th ed. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Street, Sharon. "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value." *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006): 109–66.
- . "Constructivism About Reasons." In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 3:207–45. Oxford Studies in Metaethics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . "Nothing Really Matters (But That's Not What Matters)." In *Does Anything Really Matter? Essays on Parfit on Objectivity*, 121–48. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Temkin, Larry S. "Has Parfit's Life Been Wasted? Some Reflections on Part Six of On What Matters." In *Does Anything Really Matter? Essays on Parfit on Objectivity*, 1–34. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Williams, Bernard. "Internal and External Reasons." In *Moral Luck*, 101–13. Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1981.