

# FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PRUDENCE, IS IT JUST AS REASONABLE TO CHANGE YOUR DESIRES TO FIT THE WORLD AS IT IS TO CHANGE THE WORLD TO FIT YOUR DESIRES?

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There are so many topics of interest in Dale Dorsey's wide-ranging, mind-expanding *A Theory of Prudence*, but in this essay I'll limit myself to the fascinating issues surrounding preference change and how this bears on theories of prudential normativity. This is an original and distinctive aspect of Dorsey's views, and the general problem an under-explored area of the philosophy of well-being.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Setup

Desire satisfactionism holds that our lives are made better when the world is in some respect the way we desire it to be. But there are two ways to achieve this. We can change the world so that it matches the way we already desire it to be—that's the way we usually think about. But we can also change our desires so that they match the way the world already is or is going to be. An interesting and under-explored issue with desire satisfactionism is whether each of these options really is just as good as the other from the perspective of our self-interest. And this isn't just a question for desire satisfactionism. It arises for other subjective theories, such as Dorsey's value realizationism, and even objective theories, which often include subjective goods like desire satisfaction.

I have long supposed that the answer to our question is “yes”; from the perspective of prudence, it is just as good to change our desires so that they match the world as it is to change the world so that it matches our desires. But Dorsey thinks the answer is “no”; if we conform our desires to the world rather than make the world match our desires, we sell ourselves short. Dorsey's argument is based on the case of:

*Faith*: Faith is a highly-regarded Air Force pilot who has long desired to become an astronaut. She has the physical skill, the appropriate training, has been looked on as a potential candidate. At time *t*, she has the choice to undergo the last remaining set of tests to become an astronaut *or* take a very powerful psychotropic pill that would have the result of radically, and permanently, changing her valuing attitudes. Instead of preferring to be an astro-

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<sup>1</sup>Unattributed references are to Dorsey 2021.

naut, she could instead prefer to be a highly-regarded, but Earth-bound, Air Force pilot. (212)

Dorsey hopes that we have the reaction that if Faith were to decide to take the pill and become a pilot, then this would be “imprudent”—that “as a matter of what she ought to do as concerns her own self-interest, Faith ought to become an astronaut” (213). Generalizing from this case, he thinks that we should conclude that we do not have “equivalent prudential reason to conform the world to our values and to conform our values to the world” (218). Rather, we should mold the world to our values.

I can feel the pull of the intuition about Faith that Dorsey wants us to have, but I’m also pulled in the opposite direction. For if Faith takes the pill, she will continue to value being a pilot just as much as she would have continued to value being an astronaut had she chosen that option. This makes it plausible, at least for subjectivists about well-being like Dorsey and me, that Faith will be *just as well off* in each outcome. And indeed Dorsey accepts that (222–223). Given that Faith will be just as well off in each outcome, how can prudence possibly recommend one over the other? Still, I think Dorsey’s intuition about Faith, as well as a theory that might deliver it, are worth examining.

## 2 Scoreism and Faith

With this intuition about Faith, Dorsey aims to dislodge an account of prudential reasons that he calls *Scoreism*, which he regards as the dominant view. As I understand it, according to

Scoreism about prudential reasons:

- A subject *S* has a prudential reason to do some act  $\phi$  just in case (and because) *S*’s “welfare score” in the outcome of the act is positive, where a subject’s welfare score in some outcome is how well-off overall that subject is in that outcome.
- The *strength* of a prudential reason is equal to its associated welfare score.

For a full accounting of our prudential reasons for action, Scoreism needs to be combined with a theory of well-being. Many subjective theories of well-being, when combined with Scoreism, imply what Dorsey rejects: that Faith has just as much reason to take the pill and remain a pilot. (Let’s call that outcome *pill+pilot* and the other *astronaut*.) A “concurrentist” desire-satisfaction theory of well-being, which holds that what’s of basic prudential value for a person is their getting what they want while they still want it, would be one example. If Faith chooses *astronaut*, she’ll have a long future in which she wants to be doing just what she is doing while she is doing it, but no less so if she chooses *pill+pilot*. Assuming that all else relevant to welfare is equal, Faith will get the same welfare score in

each outcome, and thus, according to Scoreism, will have as much reason to choose *pill+pilot* as *astronaut*.

Not all theories of well-being, when combined with Scoreism, imply this however—not even all subjective theories. Consider the view that

a man's future good on the whole is what he would now desire and seek on the whole if all the consequences of all the different lines of conduct open to him were accurately foreseen and adequately realised in imagination at the present point of time. (Sidgwick 1907, 111–112)

If a person's future gets a welfare score equal to the strength of the desire for that future, then, since Faith now desires *astronaut* more than *pill+pilot*, *astronaut* will have a higher welfare score. Dorsey's desired result—that Faith has more reason to choose *astronaut*—is thus true even on this Scoreist picture.

This brings us to my

First Point: You can be a Scoreist and still get the results that Faith has more reason to choose *astronaut* and that we have more reason to conform the world to our desires than our desires to the world.

This is important because it means that we can get these results without having to deny the apparent truism that one always has most prudential reason to do whatever would be most in one's interest. On the theory of well-being that Sidgwick describes together with Scoreism, not only does Faith have a *stronger prudential reason* to become an astronaut; she'd be *better off* doing so.

### 3 Another Point about Scoreism

Before considering the theory of prudential reasons that Dorsey defends in Scoreism's place, I'd like to point out that we can and should distance the truistic idea that prudence marches in lock step with well-being from Scoreism.

I'm probably a Scoreist in spirit, but I don't believe that it is exactly welfare *scores* that provide prudential reasons; it is prudential *goods*: the good things that would occur if you did some act. Now, it's true that the value of these goods is precisely what makes up a welfare score, and this means that the goods-based view I am imagining may be extensionally equivalent to Scoreism with respect to what people have most reason to do. But what explains the presence of prudential reasons are the *goods themselves*, not the score their values sum to.

This difference matters because Dorsey objects to Scoreism on grounds that depend on it. According to Dorsey, there should be a link between prudential value and prudential normativity, but there is nothing valuable in itself about a particular welfare *score*, which is just a number (220). I

am happy to agree, but there is a value-link-respecting or goods-based view that is extensionally equivalent to Scoreism. I think it is fair to call it

The Standard View of Prudence:

- *S* has a prudential reason to  $\phi$  just in case  $\phi$  would bring about something good for *S*.
- The strength of a prudential reason is equal to the magnitude of its associated good.

The Standard View still generates the result Dorsey dislikes about *Faith*, but it at least doesn't go wrong in the way Dorsey complains about; it doesn't say that welfare scores are valuable in themselves. It is, like Dorsey's own view, a "goods-based view." Dorsey evidently thinks that it is a view's being goods-based that is key to its getting the right result in *Faith*, but I think the goods-based Standard View of Prudence shows that that is not true.

This brings us to my second point, which complements the first:

Second Point: Goods-based theories of prudence can still generate the result in *Faith* that Dorsey thinks is wrong.

My first point is that Scoreist theories can get the result Dorsey thinks is *right* in *Faith*. I believe that these points together cast doubt on Dorsey's idea that *Faith* shows that we should go goods-based rather than be Scoreists. (Although, to be sure, I do think we should go goods-based).

#### 4 What Is Dorsey's Goodsism?

"Rather than holding that prudential reasons are constituted by facts about a person's overall . . . welfare score," Dorsey thinks we should endorse "Goodsism," which "holds that prudential reasons are . . . constituted by . . . the prudential goods that appear in time-indexed prudential orderings" (216, 211). The notion of a prudential ordering is original to and distinctive of Dorsey's framework. "A prudential ordering for a person at a time," Dorsey explains, "is a list of those things that . . . were they to obtain, the person would be better-off, . . . ordered by their comparative intrinsic value" (28). It is up to each theory of welfare to say what a person's prudential ordering is at any time. Hedonism would say that it consists in all the possible pleasures that the person could experience, ordered in terms of magnitude. This same ordering would hold for all times, but on other views,

it could be that different prudential orderings apply to me at different times. This might occur, for instance, if a desire-satisfaction theory is correct. [Such a] view may hold that the prudential ordering is determined by the content of my desires, with the ordering being determined by the strength of the desires. . . . However, it could be that over

time my preferences change. And hence it may be natural on this sort of view for a prudential ordering for one particular time to be non-identical with prudential orderings for later times. (74)

Perhaps this is the core of

Goodsism:

- S has a prudential reason to  $\phi$  just in case  $\phi$  would bring about something,  $g$ , that is on a relevant prudential ordering of S.
- The strength of a prudential reason is determined by  $g$ 's location on that ordering: the higher  $g$ 's location, the stronger the reason.

This view actually doesn't differ much from the Standard View, however, and won't on its own secure the desired result in *Faith*. How might we modify it to get that?

Initially, I thought Dorsey's view must be the intriguing idea that whereas how *well-off* you'd be if you were to do some act is determined by your prudential orderings at all of the times that your act would affect, your *prudential reasons*, since they aren't going to march in lock step with your well-being (on pain of getting *Faith* wrong), must be determined by your prudential ordering *just at the time of the action*. This *Time-of-Action Goodsism* delivers the result Dorsey wants about Faith— analogously, in fact, to how the Sidgwickian theory of well-being did. But I read on and learned that I had Dorsey wrong. In chapter 12, he makes it clear that he thinks that your prudential orderings at other times—including even past times—affect your reasons, and just as much as your prudential ordering at the time of action (296–300).

A natural view to attribute to him would then be

Temporally Neutral Goodsism:

- S has a prudential reason to  $\phi$  just in case  $\phi$  would bring about something,  $g$ , that is, was, or will be on a prudential ordering of S; and
- the strength of a prudential reason is determined by the number of orderings  $g$  appears on and  $g$ 's location on them.

But Temporally Neutral Goodsism gets Faith wrong, or is at least too close to this. Dorsey wants it to be that Faith has no prudential reason to take the pill and remain a pilot, but Temporally Neutral Goodsism implies that Faith does have such reason—if she takes the pill.

To see why, suppose first that, as expected, Faith decides to become an astronaut. This decision brings about something (her being an astronaut) that will be on many prudential orderings of hers, including all those on into the future, we'll suppose. Moreover, in this scenario, the act she didn't choose—taking the pill and remaining a pilot—has this feature: it *would*

not have brought about anything that *is, was, or will be* on any prudential ordering of hers. (We're assuming that *being a pilot* was never on one of Faith's past orderings.) If Faith chooses *astronaut*, she will have had good reason to do that and won't have had any reason to choose *pill+pilot*.

But suppose instead that Faith unexpectedly chooses *pill+pilot*. This choice brings about something (her being a pilot) that will be on all of her future prudential orderings. But then Temporally Neutral Goodsism implies that if Faith chooses *pill+pilot*, she will have had most reason to have chosen that. (In such a scenario, she will have had *some* reason to choose *astronaut*, owing to the presence of *being an astronaut* on her present and some past orderings, but this reason will be heavily outweighed by the presence of *being a pilot* on all of her future orderings.)

Dorsey objects:

This line of reasoning is strained. The key problem is this: it cannot be that a fact  $f$  counts in favor of an action  $\phi$  if the conditions for  $f$  to be a reason are dependent on the performance of  $\phi$ . . . . Taking the pill changes Faith's future preferences, and hence changes her future prudential ordering. But given that the state of affairs in which she is an Earth-bound pilot does not possess the necessary features to explain prudential reasons (i.e., it is not featured in her future prudential orderings independent of whether or not she takes the pill), it cannot count in favor of her doing so. (219)

Temporally Neutral Goodsism allows for this ability of acts to ensure their own justifications. Dorsey is saying that this sort of bootstrapping is off limits. Fair enough. But then what is his view? The passage above suggests

Temporally Neutral Choice-Independent Goodsism:

- $S$  has a prudential reason to  $\phi$  just in case  $\phi$  would bring about something,  $g$ , that is, was, or will be on a prudential ordering of  $S$  whether or not  $S$  does  $\phi$ , and
- the strength of a prudential reason is determined by the number of these prudential orderings that  $g$  appears on and its location on those orderings.<sup>2</sup>

Temporally Neutral Choice-Independent Goodsism avoids the bootstrapping that Dorsey objects to. *Faith* illustrates this, provided that two things are true of it: first, whichever choice Faith makes, *being an astronaut* will have been on a prudential ordering of hers. That's obviously true, since *being an astronaut* is already on her prudential ordering. Second, if Faith chooses *astronaut*, it needs to be that *being a pilot* never was or will be on a prudential ordering of hers. Then it will be false that *being a pilot* is, was,

<sup>2</sup>Eden Lin (2022, 77) offers a similar interpretation, to which I am indebted.

or will be on a prudential ordering of Faith's whether or not she chooses *pill+pilot*.

Because Temporally Neutral Choice-Independent Goodsism delivers the result that Faith has more reason to choose *astronaut*, I believe that it is Dorsey's theory. In what follows, I argue against it. But I believe that my arguments apply to any theory that delivers this result. These arguments give us reason to think, against Dorsey, that it is just as reasonable to change your desires to fit the world as it is to change the world to fit your desires.

## 5 Losing Faith

I believe that if we imagine a variant of *Faith* in which what causes her preference change is something more pedestrian than a "very powerful psychotropic pill," our reaction changes. Thus, imagine that it's not that *taking a pill* would make Faith prefer to remain a pilot, but instead that simply *thinking about the decision longer* would do this. In this version too, Faith currently prefers to become an astronaut rather than remain a pilot, but she has thought about the question for only as long as she has. And as a matter of fact, if she were to think about the question for a little longer before making her final decision, she would change her mind and come to prefer to remain a pilot after all.

In Dorsey's original case, Faith's options are:

- (a) Become an astronaut.
- (b) Take a powerful psychotropic pill, which would cause her to prefer and then choose to remain a pilot.

In my case, her options are:

- (a') Become an astronaut.
- (b') Think a little longer about whether to become an astronaut or remain a pilot, which would cause her to prefer and then choose to remain a pilot.

The cases are structurally analogous. In each, Faith currently prefers to become an astronaut and faces a choice between becoming an astronaut while continuing to prefer that, and doing an act whose effect will be that she prefers to remain a pilot, which she would then choose and continue to prefer. Dorsey's intuition about the original case is that it would be a prudential mistake for Faith to take the pill. But then it seems that he will have to say, about my variant, that it would be a prudential mistake for Faith to think for longer on the matter. Temporally Neutral Choice-Independent Goodsism implies this, precisely due to the structural similarity that my case bears to Dorsey's.

But it seems false that, in my version, Faith has more reason to choose (a') than (b'). Indeed, some people will have the reaction that, if anything,

Faith has more reason to choose (b') over (a'). That's because people tend to think that taking sufficient time to think over big decisions is a good and prudent thing. But my objection here doesn't require that. It rests only on the claim that Faith does not right now have more prudential reason to choose (a') over (b'). Because Temporally Neutral Choice-Independent Goodsism implies otherwise, we should reject this theory alongside the claim that Faith has more reason to choose (a) over (b) in the original case.

If you think it matters, we can add to my version that Faith's taking more time to think over the question wouldn't improve her cognitive situation. She has all relevant information and is able to imagine each option fully. It's simply that reflecting on it for a bit longer would cause her to change her mind. Being a pilot would just strike her with a sort of appeal it had heretofore lacked.

If your judgment about the case of Faith changes when we change from Dorsey's version to mine (assuming you agreed with Dorsey about his case in the first place), this may be because you, like most of us, have an aversion to taking mind-altering pills that determine how you think about major life choices. This feature of Dorsey's original case may thus unfairly bias things against the pilot option. But in case you think Faith should choose *astronaut* in my version too, let me correct what seem to be two further distorting factors in Dorsey's case.

The first is that Faith has "long desired" to become an astronaut (212). Some philosophers, Dorsey included, maintain that we have prudential reason to satisfy merely past desires. Given Faith's long-held desire to be an astronaut, such philosophers can get the result that Faith has more reason to choose *astronaut* even without adding *choice-independence* to their theory. The tidier Temporally Neutral Goodsism can deliver the desired result simply by relying on past desires. But this a distorting factor. Dorsey does not think that Faith's having more reason to choose *astronaut* depends on this.

The third and final factor that I think needs to be controlled for is that being an astronaut seems like an objectively greater achievement than being a pilot. This may be another contributor to the reaction that Faith has more reason to choose *astronaut*. But this is another distorting factor, for the problem Dorsey is raising here is one that is supposed to arise for wholly subjective theories, which reject objective prudential value.

Thus, consider a man we'll call Riesen, who needs to decide what color to paint his new house. Local rules allow only two options: white and gray. Each color is the same price and durability. Neither is an objectively better color than the other (of course), and Riesen has never had any past desire about what color he would want a future house to be. (So we've removed the last two distorting factors: seeming objective prudential value and long-held desires.) The decision comes down simply to Riesen's preferences on the matter.



Riesen mulls it over. He fully and vividly imagines each option. He finds himself with a preference for white. But it's in fact true of him that if he were to think about it for longer, he'd come to prefer gray. As a background matter, and as Riesen knows, whichever color he ends up choosing, he'll be glad he chose it and will forever continue to prefer it over the alternative. That's just how he's built (lucky guy).

So, Riesen currently prefers white, and faces this choice:

(a'') Pick white now.

(b'') Think about it for longer, which would cause him to prefer and then choose gray.

Let me add that there are no bad side effects to either choice. Thus, it's not that if he picks white now rather than thinking for longer, he can get on to more productive things. Nor is the deliberating stressful or annoying.

Given what Dorsey says about his original *Faith*, it appears that he is committed to holding that Riesen should choose (a''), that choosing (b'') would be a mistake. This is because "it cannot be that a fact  $f$  counts in favor of an action  $\phi$  if the conditions for  $f$  to be a reason are dependent on the performance of  $\phi$ " (219). Thus, it cannot be that Riesen's having a gray house if he chooses (b'') counts in favor of choosing (b''), since the conditions for his having a gray house to be a reason (namely, his wanting a gray house) are dependent on the performance of (b''). That Riesen should choose (a'') is also an implication of Temporally Neutral Choice-Independent Goodsism.

But this is implausible. Riesen has no more reason to pick white now than to think about it for longer and then pick gray. Prudentially speaking, it doesn't matter what he does. At the very minimum, a case like that of Riesen certainly could not be used as the basis for a compelling objection to the Standard Account or to the apparent truism it embodies that one always has most prudential reason to do whatever would be most in one's interest. If that's right, then nor is the case of Faith a compelling objection to these ideas. For the case of Riesen is more probative than the case of Faith, avoiding as it does the three distorting factors of the latter.

This brings us to my

Third Point: Consideration of these two new cases—the variant on Faith and especially Riesen—suggests that Dorsey's initially plausible judgment about the case of Faith turns out to be wrong, and we should thus want to avoid any theory, such as Temporally Neutral Choice-Independent Goodsism, that is committed to this judgment.

Perhaps you initially agreed with Dorsey about Faith, but you saw that his view on Faith led him to divorce prudence from welfare in a radical way (again, prudence, according to Dorsey, says that it is sometimes a pruden-

tial mistake to do what would make you best off). But if prudence says it's wrong to do something that would make you best off, it may have made you think: then I don't want to be right. If I am correct that Dorsey is mistaken about Faith, then we can thankfully avoid this paradoxical divorce between prudence and welfare.

## 6 One Final Case

I'll conclude by presenting a new and unrelated problem case for Dorsey.

*Cure for Depression:* Steven is suffering from major depression. Drug C and Drug W would each cure Steven fully and permanently, though each has a single, unusual side effect. Drug C causes its users to prefer cold weather to warm weather and Drug W causes them to prefer warm weather to cold. Owing to his depression, Steven currently couldn't care less what kind of weather he either lives in or prefers. He doesn't even care now whether he later lives in the sort of climate he would then prefer to live in. It happens that Steven lives in Fargo, North Dakota, which has a cold climate, and will live out his remaining years there whichever drug he chooses.

It seems clear that Steven should opt for Drug C over Drug W. Only then will he be living in the sort of climate that he will prefer to live in, and all else is equal.

But I don't believe that Dorsey can agree with this. Just as we should, according to Dorsey, ignore anything in Faith's future prudential orderings that is dependent on her taking her pill, in evaluating the prudence of Steven's taking Drug C, we should ignore anything whose appearance in his future prudential orderings is dependent on his taking Drug C, such as *his living in a cold climate*. But then it's not clear that Dorsey can agree that Steven should opt for Drug C.

Nor can Temporally Neutral Choice-Independent Goodsism agree with this. For it is false that Steven's taking Drug C would bring about something that is, was, or will be on a prudential ordering of his whether or not he takes Drug C. Steven will prefer to live in the sort of climate that he will be living in only if he takes Drug C, not whether or not he does. So this, according to this theory, cannot support his taking Drug C.

This brings us to my

Fourth Point: *Cure for Depression* seems like a good counterexample to Temporally Neutral Choice-Independent Goodsism and a problem for anyone who wants to hold that Faith has more reason to choose to become an astronaut than take the pill and become a pilot.

## 7 Conclusion

Thinking about these cases alongside Dorsey's attempt to get a certain answer to the case of Faith leads me to believe that that answer cannot be plausibly defended. Faith has just as much prudential reason to take the pill and remain a pilot as she does to become an astronaut. More generally, from the perspective of prudence, it's just as good to change your desires so that they match the world as it is to change the world so that it matches your desires. I can accept this important discovery. If Dorsey cannot, I'm eager to learn where my thinking may have gone wrong.

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