

# Is Subjectivism Incoherent?<sup>1</sup>

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Is immoral action necessarily incoherent or inconsistent?

Julia Markovits's *Moral Reason* offers an exceptionally clear case for answering yes.<sup>2</sup> Markovits has provided us a serious, impressive, and admirable work of philosophy. It deserves, and will richly repay, careful study. Those who disagree will be forced to explain exactly where they get off the Markovits bus because she does not hide behind vague faux-profundity. She has put pressure on those who disagree to explain exactly which steps in her argument they think they can resist.

Here I take up that challenge. My central claim will be that she has not shown that neo-Humean subjectivist views, according to which some possible agents have most reason to behave immorally, need involve any incoherence or inconsistency. Thus, I claim, she has not succeeded in showing that immorality must be incoherent.

Broadly, as I interpret her, Markovits's argument to the conclusion that immoral actions are subject to the decisive non-moral fault of being incoherent involves four main parts. First, she argues for a revised version of Williamsian Internalism according to which agents have the normative power that what they value after procedurally rational deliberation provides them with reasons. Call this the Agent's Fundamental Normative Power. Second, she argues that agents must explain the existence of this Power. Third, she argues that the subjectivist's agent-relative explanation of our Power, in which what I rationally value provides me with reasons but what you rationally value need not, are inadequate. Fourth, the only genuinely coherent explanation of the Power, she maintains, is that what I rationally value is valuable because I am valuable and what valuable creatures rationally value is valuable. But as other agents are valuable in the same way I am, their rational valuations are similarly valuable and provide me with reasons as well. Thus we have reasons to be concerned with what others rationally care about. And that commits us to morality. And, Markovits maintains, it commits us to a distinctively Kantian rather than consequentialist understanding of morality.

We will here be focused on the second and, primarily, the third step in the above argument. I maintain that we do not have before us a successful argument for ruling out

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Julia Markovits and Steve Wall for valuable discussion.

<sup>2</sup> *Moral Reasons*, Oxford University Press, 2014. Citations in the text are to this work.

as incoherent a subjectivist view in which my rational valuations give me, but not necessarily you, reasons. And subjective views are compatible with there being agents who lack reason to be moral or who would not be irrational to be immoral. Thus, I conclude, we do not have before us here a successful argument that shows that one must be irrational to be immoral.

I will mainly focus here on areas of disagreement. But we agree about a lot. We agree that practical reasons (or rationality) fundamentally have to answer to the point of view of the agent whose reasons or rationality is in question. We agree in not finding compelling a model where there are facts about what an agent has practical reason to do that are analogous to mathematical facts or physical facts in that their truth is secured independently from the agent's own evaluative point of view. We agree that Williams's Internalism provides a useful first stab at capturing the sort of connection between the agent and her reasons that we find plausible. But, we agree, Williams's own version of that connection can be counter-exemplified and needs refinement. The key thought, we agree, is not that reasons must be capable of motivating but that one's reasons must answer in some crucial way to what you care about. We agree that a key to refining that connection is to hold on to the thought that there must be a way of deliberately connecting an agent's point of view with her reasons that is, what we both call, proceduralist rather than substantive.

Many will have gotten off the bus well before now, but not the subjectivist. Perhaps both the subjectivist and the Kantian and battling it out on the wrong bus entirely but I will not pursue that possibility here.

### **1) Markovits's Argument that it is Procedurally Irrational to be Immoral**

Despite our not directly focusing on Markovits's case for a modified version of internalism, we should pause over this moment in the book. There is an important distinction between making a case to the general reader that some variant of internalism is true and being licensed to assume that every agent must start out with such a premise on pain of procedural irrationality. For example, if the case for internalism were a form of reflective equilibrium that makes use of provisional beliefs that most of us have but that all agents need not have, such arguments would be ineffective in persuading us that all agents must accept this starting point on pain of incoherence. Thus we would need to re-scrutinize Markovits's arguments for internalism to make sure that they do not have such a structure but instead show that internalism is forced on agents if they are to be coherent.<sup>3</sup>

Markovits's argument that I mean to focus on here, recall, starts by confronting an agent who understands that she has the Power and asking her what is the best explanation for her having it. This is the second step in the four-step argument I outlined above. She imagines the agent tempted initially to try out the answer that perhaps there are just a set of unrelated brute facts of the form "If I rationally value eating pomegranates, I

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<sup>3</sup> Recently, in conversation, Markovits accepts that her argument for internalism has the reflective equilibrium structure and thus that she cannot rely on all coherent agents accepting her version of internalism. She maintains that the later arguments of the book rule out as incoherent all alternatives to her Kantian view even without this presupposition. So read, I would claim that she does not sufficiently address non-internalist ways of rendering coherent our presupposition that we have genuine normative reasons. Additionally, so read, the importance of her arguments for internalism in chapters 2 and 3 to her vindication of the Kantian project is unclear.

have reason to do so” and “If I rationally value playing Parcheesi, I have reason to play Parcheesi” etc. Markovits objects that this answer lacks “internal coherence” because “there is just something arbitrary and dogmatic about valuing many such unrelated, unsystematic, contingently-chosen ends, without some more fundamental explanation for why they matter.” (132) And “The virtue of willing a mutually supportive, systematically justified set of ends is a virtue of procedural rationality.” (133)

The first thing to say here is that we should keep distinct complaints that say that it is genuinely contradictory for an agent to do something from complaints that say that there is some other normative problem with their mental states. It may be problematic to accept as brute facts tons of unrelated things and have no story at all about the relationship between any of them. But even if so this situation would not yet be shown to be contradictory. Markovits sometimes suggests that the goal is to show there to be some sort of inconsistency in the outlook of the immoral person. She writes, in perhaps the clearest statement of what “procedural” is meant to convey “According to a procedural notion of rationality, the rational requirement to hold certain ends is generated indirectly by the relation of those ends to other ends we do hold, as a result, in particular, of requirements of internal consistency and coherence.” (110)

Markovits primarily fixes on the term “incoherent”, which is ambiguous between “internally inconsistent” and “not properly orderly and systematic”. My point for now is that a person’s attitudes not being fully systematic and unified into a tight overall package may be a rational vice, but that by itself does not show that such an agent is internally inconsistent.

To be sure, it is quite plausible that there are ways of being procedurally irrational other than being inconsistent. But for my money such additional ways of being procedurally irrational should have to earn their way by making a case that they involve failing to take the means, broadly conceived, towards what the agent really values or what she would want after proper procedural idealization.

A proper procedural account of idealization, all will agree, will not presuppose, and build this presupposition into the content of the idealization, that certain specific goods are more worthy of the idealized valuing attitude than others. But saying only so much would have it that a view that privileged one’s desires on Tuesday or while wearing a hat would still count as compatible with Proceduralism as such views do not presuppose that any specific good is valuable for the agent. Yet these sorts of restrictions seem arbitrary and they are not plausibly designed to help capture the agent’s own evaluative point of view. A more tempting understanding of good procedural idealization would explicate and reveal the agent’s genuine concerns, not randomly privilege a class of concerns that does not especially reflect the agent’s real evaluative perspective. For example, my own favored type of idealization, which is typical of subjectivist views, will privilege favoring attitudes that are responsive to the object as it really is rather than as it is falsely imagined to be. Such attitudes quite plausibly are getting at what the agent really cares about. That is not to say that all agents will agree about this method of getting at their true concerns. Subjectivists need not suppose that agents are infallible about the epistemology of their own genuine concerns. Rather, they must make good on the claim that the procedure is in fact well designed to get at the agent’s genuine concerns.

It is not yet clear to me that Markovits, and other Kantians who rely on such notions of systematicity and unification such as Michael Smith, have made a case that their view either fits well with what I have called the more tempting understanding of a proper

procedural idealization or have outlined a rival understanding of the scope of distinctively procedural criticisms of an agent that still purports to capture the agent's own evaluative perspective. But having noted this issue, I will ask us not to focus on it. It would be incredibly interesting and significant if people who had a powerful reason to have systematic and unified normative commitments could not coherently be immoral. I propose to focus on that question.

The second thing to say is that a more likely response on the part of the agent who is asked to explain her Power would be to claim that, quite generally, her procedurally rational favoring attitudes provide her with reasons. If she says such a thing, her various commitments do not obviously appear unsystematic and disordered. Markovits's accepts this and realizes she still has to explain why the best way to impose order on our thinking involves thinking that "things matter only because they matter to us, and we matter" (133) rather than thinking that what matters to me, after procedurally rational deliberation, provides me with reasons. Markovits maintains that she has left our world be procedurally rational agent with a job to do—explain in some unified way why she has the Fundamental Normative Power she has to determine her own reasons. It is the pressure to explain this that is the engine that powers Markovits's Kantian program.

The third step in Markovits's argument is designed to rule out agent-relative explanations for the Fundamental Normative Power. She offers several considerations in favor of this view and we will be concerned to assess all of these considerations. So far we are only assuming that the agent's rationally valuing something co-varies with reasons that she has and that the agent must provide a unified explanation of that fact. A possible explanation for this power, one that appeals to the subjectivist, is that agents are such that if they rationally value  $x$ , then they have a reason to get  $x$ . That is, my reasons are responsive to what I rationally value and your reasons are responsive to what you rationally value. On the subjectivist view, what I rationally value after ideal procedural deliberation might involve giving no weight to what you rationally value. Markovits's argument needs to rule out this explanation for the Fundamental Normative Power.

Let's consider what she thinks is wrong with the subjectivist's agent-relative explanation. Markovits tells us that she starts, like Kant, "from an optimism that some of the things that matter to me really matter—that I have genuine reason to pursue and protect and respect and promote them—then I am claiming more for my ends than just that they're what I am after." (134) And this involves the thought that "I take my ends to be justifiable in a way that others should be able to recognize." (134) This optimism, I take it, is not that what I am after is independently valuable and so provides reasons but rather involves the thought that the fact that I am rationally after it ensures that it is something I have normative reason to do. This, of course, is something our subjectivist thinks as well. Our subjectivist maintains that an agent rationally valuing something gives her genuine reasons to get that thing. And, of course, our subjectivist thinks that others can come to appreciate the justifiability of subjectivism. That is why we subjectivists write papers trying to defend the view. Such Kantian optimism provides no reason to break with subjectivism.

Markovits also claims that reasons "must appeal to 'outsiders'." (135). That is, "there can be agent-relative reasons, on this view, but there cannot be reasons that are recognizable as such only from a fully parochial perspective." (135). Markovits approvingly quotes Onora O'Neill here who writes "If principles of action are to be offered as reasons for action to others. . . they must at least be principles that could be adopted by those

others and used to organize their actions.” (134–5) I am not completely sure I understand the thought here but if I understand it then I think the subjectivist too can and does accept it. One thought here might be that our reasons must supervene on our properties and cannot simply be determined by the fact that I am me. Considerations that provide me with a reason must in principle be capable of applying to other people’s situations since it is due to something about me that I have a reason to do something. And again our subjectivist can and does accept this. The subjectivist insists that it is because one rationally values *x* that one has a reason to get *x*. And this claim certainly seems to pass O’Neill’s test. Such a principle could be adopted by others and used to organize their action. People could accept that subjectivist considerations provided one with reasons. Indeed, the subjectivist’s claim that each person’s rational valuations give her reasons is offered as a general theory of reasons that applies to all. In any case, saying that others could not accept it even after ideal procedural deliberation seems question begging at this stage. So our subjectivist still seems not ruled out yet but rather to whole-heartedly agree with everything Markovits has said so far.

Markovits next says, still following O’Neill, that if a consideration genuinely provides me with a reason, it must be that a “stranger must be able to, at least in principle, see how that consideration functions as a reason in my circumstances.” (135) I find this requirement a bit obscure and I doubt it is intended to rule out subjectivism. It would be odd to rest content with the bald claim that strangers cannot see how subjectivist considerations could function as reasons. Many people think they see exactly this. This would have to be the conclusion of an argument against subjectivism, not something one could just successfully assert as a stand-alone argument against the view.

Next, Markovits writes, “I suspect, however, that I can recognize an agent-relative reason of this sort for someone to do something only if I recognize a related agent-neutral value: that is, for example, I can recognize your agent-relative reason to do what benefits your child only if I also think there is some kind of agent-neutral value in people benefiting their own children. Your action’s share in this value is what makes your reason non-parochial.” (135)

We will be pausing after this claim, which I think is meant to be the key to ruling out subjectivism. First let us worry about interpreting the claim. If the upshot of such an agent neutral reason is merely that others have a reason to pursue the objects of their rational valuations, the subjectivist can agree. If the upshot is that you necessarily have some reason to help me achieve what I rationally value, then the subjectivist will disagree. We need to distinguish between two claims 1) that if *X* has an agent-relative reason to do *Y* in circumstances *C*, then all relevantly similarly situated agents would also have a reason to do *Y*. This our subjectivist accepts. And 2) if *X*’s rational values provide her with reasons, the rational values of *X* must provide all with reasons. This our subjectivist denies. There are several reasons I think it is really the second claim that Markovits means to be championing here. Only the second claim helps rule out the subjectivist, puts us on the road to vindicating rational pressure on everyone to be moral, and explains why the remaining proposals Markovits thinks still need to be considered, like hedonistic or preference satisfaction consequentialism, are such that each of our rational concerns places rational pressure on all. So I will run with the latter interpretation. Her claim, as I will understand it, is that my rational valuations could not provide me with reasons unless in some way or other they provide everyone with reasons.

I want to make several points about this central claim. First, the claim is offered only as a “suspicion” and so it would seem that it is explicitly being allowed, or not shown to be ruled out, that procedurally rational agents could fail to accept this. We are not given any argument for this view and so it is hard to see how a person could maintain that this view is shown to be forced upon any procedurally rational agent. Since the goal is to show that immorality is necessarily incoherent or self-contradictory, the admission that one has not shown some options that would deny this to be incoherent or self-contradictory spoils hopes of arriving at the desired conclusion. If subjectivism has not been ruled out, then the argument meant to establish that it is necessarily procedurally irrational to be immoral fails.

Second, saying that we can only “recognize” an agent-relative value if it is related to an agent-neutral value noticeably avoids saying that the explanation for this fact is metaphysical rather than having to do with the psychology of (some? optimistic?) valuers. Likely this is to avoid the appearance of relying on robust realist claims about reasons. But the weaker claim about what we can recognize opens the door to anthropocentric explanations of this claim. Further, subjectivists purport to be able to recognize agent-relative reasons without agent-neutral one’s. They are owed some argument to the effect that this appearance is mistaken.

Third, I have not made any case that it is false that we must see an agent neutral value behind every agent relative value. I suspect some will find this view congenial. I do not aspire here to show that this claim is false. My only point here is that we do not have an argument on the table sufficient to justify this key claim. And if that is so, we do not have an argument here that can show us that immorality is incoherent.

Fourth, agent-neutrality is an awkward fit with deontology. Perhaps, for this reason, it is best to interpret the sense of agent-neutrality she champions as compatible with differences in weight of reasons.

The last argument Markovits’s offers that perhaps is intended to rule out agent-relative explanations of our Fundamental Normative Power concludes that maintaining that only my own rational valuations provide me with reasons would be dogmatic. She writes, “Even if stamp collecting became all I cared about, so that my own value-commitments looked quite systematically justifiable, I would fail terribly at demonstrating epistemically healthy humility. I would totally dismiss most other people’s perceptions of value from the start, with no way of defending the dismissal. So it’s important that the end I recognize as the source of value, and so of systematic justification, for my ends make sense as a potential source of value for the ends of others.” (136)

Perhaps what is being imagined here is a person who thinks that whatever they rationally value is agent-neutrally valuable but other people’s rational valuations have no such normative upshot. Against that view I find Markovits’s argument persuasive. But another, much more plausible view would maintain that my rational valuations provide me with reasons and your rational valuations provide you with reasons. Such a view would not fall prey to the humility argument. Such a view does not arbitrarily privilege my perceptions of value over yours. Our rational perceptions are allowed to be equal in their normative upshot. Such a view says that your perceptions of value, if rational, are connected to your reasons in just the way that mine are to my reasons.

The debate I am most interested in between agent-relative and agent-neutral explanations of our Power has by this point ended as Markovits is now only focused on agent-neutral explanations. The dispute between subjectivism and rationalism has, by this point in the book, been settled in favor of the rationalist. I claim her arguments that might have

shown subjectivism to be incoherent have been considered above and shown to either be compatible with subjectivism or to be coherently resistible. The upshot, as I see it, is that subjectivism has not been ruled out as a fully coherent position and thus it has not been ruled out that there can be agents that, in some possible circumstances, lack any reason to be moral.<sup>4</sup>

Markovits moves on to consider utilitarian explanations of our power that maintain that desire satisfaction generally has agent-neutral value. She resists this explanation by saying “But if the objects of our desires have no value in themselves, and the experience of having our desires satisfied has no value in itself, and we, the subjects of the desire have no value in ourselves, then why should the satisfaction of our desires have any value at all? This seems mysterious, unmotivated. The question pushes us back around to the Kantian line of thought I have been pushing, which provides an answer: it matters that we get what we desire, when it matters, because we matter.” (141)

Given my limited space, I cannot give this compressed thought adequate treatment here. But the Kantian must claim that all the problematic mystery in the above passage stems from the purported fact that, on the rival views, the subjects of the desires have “no value in ourselves”. The Kantian herself accepts the previous two of the three components that add up to the mystery. But I find quite contentious the claim that utilitarianism or subjectivism is committed to the view that the agent has no value in herself.<sup>5</sup> I see the claim that an agent’s welfare matters or that her rational concerns give her reasons as interpretations of what it is for something to matter in itself or the purported upshot of the fact that they do, not denials of such worth.<sup>6</sup> Certainly there is nothing in the text to persuade us that this is an incoherent view. Further, if we are to not beg the question against the subjectivist here we must not presuppose that the only way to matter in yourself is to matter agent-neutrally. Finally, the pattern of argumentation here, which maintains that if each sub-component of X lacks property P, then it is problematically mysterious to claim that X has property P, does not seem to be a generally valid argumentative pattern. It would be quite contentious to maintain that all emergent properties are mysterious. Thus I do not yet see here a convincing argument that the subjectivist view is incoherent. However, I do see a quite interesting line of argumentation that is well worth developing further.

Parenthetically, I would add that even if it had been shown that procedural rationality requires that we care for each person’s procedurally rational concerns because they are valuable just like us, it would to my mind remain to be shown that this is the best under-

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<sup>4</sup> In “Subjectivism and Reasons to be Moral”, in my *From Valuing to Value*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming, I attempt to show that such a view is less counter-intuitive and has more serious advantages than one might have expected.

<sup>5</sup> Understanding what Markovits means to be saying in claiming that agents matter in themselves is complicated. She accepts internalism about reasons but not about value (see p. 149, note 5). It seems that the sense in which we matter in ourselves, which stands at the end of the explanation of our Power, is likely best understood as on the externalist side. But either way, and whatever exactly it comes to to matter in oneself, it is unclear why she thinks the Kantian has a better explanation for this than the subjectivist.

<sup>6</sup> It is somewhat vague what it is to “have no value in ourselves”. Our subjectivist can say that agents who lack desires and who no one cares for are still normatively potent in a way that rocks are not since such agents need only start caring about something and then they will start having reasons to do things. In this way our subjectivist sees such agents as having a capacity that normatively matters in a way that rocks do not. I am suggesting this is plausibly enough to earn the subjectivist the right to say that, on their view, such an agent normatively matters in a way that rocks do not. Of course our subjectivist may be unable to vindicate some other understandings of what it is to matter.

standing of morality. Unless we start from a premise of moral rationalism, showing that we are rationally required to X, even where X fits tolerably well with our pre-theoretic intuitions about morality, does not obviously suffice to show us that morality is best understood along these lines.

## 2) Two Strategies for Vindicating Rational Pressure to Care for Your Future Self

Markovits wonders what resources are available to the proceduralist internalist to vindicate the thought that even the person who fails to care about their future self has reason to look out for their future self. This is quite similar to Parfit's Agony Argument against subjectivism. Parfit alleged that the subjectivist cannot vindicate the thought that we necessarily have a reason to avoid future agony if we fail now, after procedurally rational deliberation, to care about this future agony.<sup>7</sup>

Markovits's solution is to say that the Kantian's moral rationalism will handle this problem. On her view, we must look out in some ways for all sentient beings. And since our future self is a sentient being, we are required to look out for her too. We are rationally required to care for our future self in the same way we are rationally required to care for other agents. So the lack of a special, more personal, reason to care for our future self, in the odd case in which we do not care about them or their concerns, is handled by this more impersonal requirement.

I have argued elsewhere that Parfit's complaint against the subjectivist is quite broadly misguided and that subjectivists can maintain that one is rationally required to take into account one's future concerns in a way that one is not required to care for the concerns of strangers. Part of the thought is that since we are wondering what reasons Joe or Sally have, and Joe and Sally are temporally extended agents, it is completely non-arbitrary to maintain that temporally extended agents' reasons are responsive not just to her current rational values but also to the rational values she will have in the future. It would be arbitrary and unmotivated to claim that the reasons of a temporally extended agent are determined just by her current values. But I lack time to rehearse those arguments here.<sup>8</sup>

But I do think my view provides a better account of the tighter, more necessary connection we intuitively feel between my reasons now and my future rational concerns than there is between my reasons now and the rational concerns of others. We think it makes sense to take greater pains to avoid one's own future agony than the agony of a stranger. My view vindicates that thought and as far as I can see Markovits's does not. Further, I think my view does better at capturing our intuitive sense that even if the Kantian Rationalist project fails, still I have reason to care about my future self. Even if I lack a reason to concern myself with the rational concerns of all other agents, surely I have a reason to avoid my own future agony. It is precisely because we have this intuition so strongly that Parfit focused on the non-contingent nature of reasons to avoid one's own future agony, rather than on the non-contingent nature of reasons to be moral, in arguing against subjectivism. That is, it seems clearer and harder to deny that we all have reasons to avoid our own future agony than it is that we all have reasons to be moral. An advantage of my approach is that it can vindicate that appearance.

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<sup>7</sup> Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, volume 1, Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> See my "Parfit's Case Against Subjectivism", *From Valuing to Value*. [Oxford University Press, forthcoming.](#)