Future Desires, the Agony Argument, and Subjectivism about Reasons

According to subjectivism about reasons, your desires are the source of all of your reasons for action: whenever there is a reason for you to perform an action, this is explained by the fact that the action is appropriately related to at least one of your desires.\(^1\) Much of the literature on this view proceeds at a relatively high level of abstraction: the view is characterized in general terms, and some examples are given of the reasons that it postulates, but the nature of the relation that must obtain between an action and the desire that grounds a reason for it is left unspecified. Insofar as there is any consensus about how to formulate subjectivism more precisely, however, it is understood as maintaining that a desire of yours generates a reason for you to perform a particular action if and only if and because your performing that action would promote the satisfaction of that desire.\(^2\) Moreover, subjectivists and their opponents alike have generally taken the view to endorse the presentist thesis that reasons for present actions are grounded in present desires: there is a reason for you to do A at t if and only if this would promote the satisfaction of a desire that you have at t.\(^3\)

In this paper, I motivate and investigate the prospects of subjectivist theories that accept the futurist thesis that reasons for present actions are grounded in present or future desires: there is a reason for you to do A at t if and only if this would promote the satisfaction of a desire that you have at t or at a later time. Parfit’s Agony Argument appears to give futurist subjectivism a significant advantage over its presentist counterpart. Suppose that I can perform an action now that would prevent me from feeling an episode of agony in the future. While I will strongly desire not to be in agony if I am in agony in the future, at present, I am indifferent to the prospect of future agony, and I have no desire whose satisfaction would be promoted by my performing that action. Presentist subjectivism has the counterintuitive implication that there is no reason for me to perform the action that would prevent my future agony.\(^4\) It appears that subjectivists could avoid this result by endorsing futurism, since they could then maintain that my future desire not to be feeling agony gives me a present reason to

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1 This view is also called the Humean theory, the desire-based theory, and internalism. For further discussion, see Schroeder (2007a) and (2007b), Heathwood (2011), Sobel (2011), and Markovits (2014).


3 As I will explain later, Sobel (2011) is the most prominent dissenter.

4 Parfit (2011), pp. 73-82.
prevent the agony. Moreover, as I will explain, futurist subjectivism has other advantages that should make it attractive to many subjectivists.

Futurist subjectivism faces a serious problem, however. Unlike the desires that I presently have, the desires that I will have in the future can depend on what I do now. In some cases, I will have a given desire if and only if I perform a particular action now. In others, I will have a given desire if and only if I do not perform a particular action now. Futurist subjectivists must tell us whether, in such cases, the relevant future desire can generate a reason for me to perform the action. More generally, they must tell us which of my possible future desires give me reasons to promote their satisfaction now.

Suppose, for example, that I am given an opportunity to try an exotic dish that does not sound at all appealing to me. I have no desire to try it, and if I pass up this opportunity, I will never acquire such a desire. If I do try it, however, then I will be pleasantly surprised and will almost instantly acquire a desire to be doing exactly what I am doing: trying the dish. Does this possible future desire of mine, whose satisfaction I would promote by trying the dish and which I will acquire if and only if I try it, ground a reason for me to try it? Or suppose, instead, that I have the option of going to bootcamp, which is the first step to becoming a soldier. I presently have no desire to be a soldier, and if I go to bootcamp, what I learn there about military life will prevent me from ever acquiring such a desire. If I do not go, however, then a few months from now, I will attend a militaristic parade that will arouse in me a desire to be a soldier—a desire whose satisfaction I would promote by going to bootcamp now. Does this possible future desire, which I will have if and only if I do not go to bootcamp, give me a reason to go? In both cases, it might be psychologically realistic to suppose that I already have a desire whose satisfaction I would promote by performing the relevant action: a desire for pleasure, in the case of the exotic dish, or a desire to know what bootcamp is like, in the case of bootcamp. It might therefore seem plausible that any subjectivist theory, whether presentist or futurist, will imply that I have reason to perform those actions. But the question that futurist subjectivists must answer is whether the aforementioned possible future desires give me reasons to perform those actions. If the desire to try the dish—a desire that I will have if and only if I try it—gives me a reason to try it, then I have a reason to try it even if, due to some quirk in my psychology, I presently have no desire whose satisfaction I would promote by trying it. If the desire to be a soldier, which I will have if and only if I do not go to bootcamp, gives me a reason to go, then I have a reason to go even if I now have no desire whose satisfaction I would promote by going. Futurists must tell us whether those
desires, whose eventual presence in my psychology depends precisely on whether I perform those actions, give me reasons to perform them. More generally, they must identify which of an agent’s many possible future desires give that agent reasons to promote their satisfaction now.

As I will explain, this problem does not have an easy solution. Each of the most natural answers has counterintuitive implications. Indeed, the problem threatens to undermine one of the main putative advantages of futurism: the hope that it will allow subjectivists to answer the Agony Argument. For what is otherwise the most plausible solution is unable to ensure that I have reason to prevent my future agony now. Having explored the most natural options, I will make a less obvious proposal: futurist subjectivists should claim that whether there is a reason for you to do something depends not only on what you would promote by doing it, but also on what you would promote by not doing it. If they accept this view, they can avail themselves of a promising solution to the problem while also answering the Agony Argument. However, even this option has implications that some would find counterintuitive. Whether it is sufficiently plausible on balance, and whether there are better solutions to be found, are matters that merit further investigation.

Although I will be focusing on a version of subjectivism that has not been thoroughly explored, my discussion will have implications for a class of subjectivist views that many theorists have defended: idealizing views, on which the desires that can generate reasons for you to do something now are the ones that you would now have if you were idealized in certain ways (e.g., if you were fully informed and rational, or if you had deliberated soundly). Some views of this sort claim to answer the Agony Argument by building a reference to your future desires into their accounts of the relevant kind of idealization. As I will explain, these views face a close analogue of the problem that I will be raising for futurist subjectivism. My discussion will therefore bear on whether subjectivists can plausibly answer the Agony Argument by appealing to desires that would be had in idealized conditions.

1. Futurist Subjectivism

I want to begin by saying more about why futurist subjectivism is attractive and why it deserves our attention. But first, let me mention a few complications that I will be setting aside.
My concern in this paper is with normative reasons for action—reasons that justify or count in favor of actions—rather than with explanatory or motivating reasons for action. Like most writers in the literature, I assume that there are non-contrastive reasons—reasons to do \( A \), as opposed to reasons to do \( A \) rather than \( B \)—and I restrict my attention to such reasons.\(^5\)

When you desire something for its own sake, you desire it intrinsically. When you desire something because of what it leads to, prevents, or signifies, you desire it extrinsically. Although subjectivists are not explicit about this, many of them would presumably claim that only intrinsic desires generate reasons for action. Others might distinguish between behavioral desires (i.e., ones whose objects you are motivated to bring about) and genuine-attraction desires (i.e., ones whose objects genuinely appeal to you), and they might argue that only members of one of those kinds count.\(^6\) I will remain neutral on these matters. When I speak of desires, you should take me to be speaking of desires of the kind that counts on the best subjectivist view—whatever that kind turns out to be.

It is commonly assumed that a desire is satisfied just if its object obtains and frustrated just if its object doesn’t obtain. However, McDaniel and Bradley have argued that this view cannot adequately handle conditional desires (e.g., my desire to have a beer later, provided that I am not too tired then): if a conditional desire’s condition isn’t met, then the desire is neither satisfied nor frustrated but cancelled—whether or not its object obtains.\(^7\) If they are right, as I am inclined to believe, then since an action that promotes the object of a desire can also ensure that the desire’s condition isn’t met, an action can promote the object of a desire without promoting the satisfaction of that desire. I will set this issue aside by assuming that the desires in the cases that I will discuss are either unconditional or such that their conditions are guaranteed to be met regardless of what their subjects do.\(^8\)

According to subjectivists, facts about reasons for action are explained by facts about which states of affairs would be promoted by which actions. The idea of promotion is fairly intuitive, and it is easy

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\(^5\) See Snedegar (2013) and (2014) for arguments that all reasons are contrastive. I should also mention that, like others in this literature, I count as actions some events that would, on certain narrower uses of ‘action’, be categorized as omissions (e.g., refraining from pushing a button). Those who object to this broad use of ‘action’ should understand subjectivism and its competitors to be theories about reasons for options—a category that includes both actions and omissions.

\(^6\) For more on this distinction, see Heathwood (forthcoming) and Lin (2016). Chang (2004) makes a similar distinction between urges and affective desires, and she claims that only the latter generate reasons. Also, see Parfit (2011), p. 43.

\(^7\) McDaniel and Bradley (2008).

\(^8\) Heathwood (2005, p. 490) claims that a desire is satisfied only if it overlaps temporally with its obtaining object. But perhaps this temporal concurrence requirement seems more plausible than it is because so many desires are conditional on their own persistence. I will remain neutral on whether subjectivists should require temporal concurrence.
enough to think of cases in which this relation obtains: at least typically, you can promote the aim of getting good grades by studying, and you can promote your winning the lottery by buying a ticket. But what precisely it is for an action to promote a state of affairs is controversial. On what may be the simplest view, an action promotes a state of affairs just if it causes an increase in the probability that it will obtain. But like every other existing account, this view has problems. I will therefore proceed without assuming any particular account of promotion. The issues that I want to discuss will arise no matter what the right account of this relation turns out to be.

Let me now explain why futurist subjectivism is a view that many subjectivists should find appealing. I already noted that, unlike presentism, futurism seems capable of accommodating the intuition that I have a reason to prevent my future agony in the situation described in the Agony Argument: for although I am stipulated to lack any present desire whose satisfaction would be promoted by my preventing my future agony, there is a future desire of mine—the desire not to be in agony that I will have once I am in agony—whose satisfaction would be promoted by that act. Futurism should look promising to those subjectivists who are unwilling to bite the bullet here.

Futurist subjectivism is also supported by a natural extension of the considerations that lead two of the most prominent contemporary subjectivists, Schroeder and Sobel, to favor subjectivism in the first place. These theorists begin by observing that at least some of our reasons are grounded in our desires: the fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for me to go there because I want to dance, and I have reason to eat chocolate ice cream but no reason to eat pistachio ice cream because I like the former but not the latter. But if our reasons about such matters of taste are based on our desires, they argue, then because we should favor a unified account on which all reasons are explained in the same way, there should be a strong presumption in favor of subjectivism. Notice, though, that if cases like these suggest that desires for things like dancing and chocolate ice cream can ground reasons to perform present actions (as Schroeder and Sobel assume), they suggest that such desires can do this even if they are future desires. If I have never danced before and now have no desire to do it, but I will love it if I try it, then it is plausible that my future desire for dancing

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9 See, e.g., Behrends and DiPaolo (2011); Behrends and DiPaolo (2016); Coates (2014); DiPaolo and Behrends (2015); Lin (2018); Schroeder (2007a), pp. 110-13; Sharadin (2015b); Sharadin and Dellsén (forthcoming); and Snedegar (2014).
12 Schroeder (2007a) and (2007b); Sobel (2005) and (2011), p. 78.
grounds a reason for me to go where there will be dancing. Even if I have no desire for chocolate or pistachio ice cream, the fact that I will want to be eating chocolate ice cream if I eat it but will not want to be eating pistachio ice cream if I eat it seems to explain why I have reason to eat the former but not the latter. Thus, the sorts of cases that motivate Schroeder and Sobel to favor subjectivism also reveal futurism to be a natural and plausible view.

Another motivation for futurism is provided by the fact that we are temporally extended creatures rather than time-slices. As Sobel argues, assuming that subjectivism is true, it is natural to suppose that the reasons of a temporally extended agent are determined, in part, by her future desires: after all, those desires will be hers. Indeed, he writes, “[i]t would be arbitrary and unmotivated to claim that the reasons of a temporally extended agent are determined just by her current values.”

If futurism is such a natural and well-motivated view, then why has it been so commonly assumed that subjectivism takes a presentist form? The reason for this, I suspect, is that one of the historically most influential arguments for subjectivism seems to support presentism while ruling out futurism. Williams famously argued for subjectivism on the grounds that normative reasons and motivation are closely connected: if something is a normative reason for you to perform an action, then it must be possible for it to motivate you to perform it. If we add the plausible claim that a consideration can motivate you to do something only if it is appropriately connected to one of your desires, we are pushed in the direction of subjectivism. On the face of it, however, this argument supports the presentist version of subjectivism while undermining the futurist one. For it appears that you could fail to be motivated to perform an action even though it would promote the satisfaction of a desire that you will have in the future, so long as it would not promote the satisfaction of any desires that you presently have. Futurist subjectivism therefore seems to violate the Williamsian constraint that

13 Sobel (2011), pp. 72-73 and (2016), p. 538. Sobel (2011) argues that futurism is a live option for subjectivists, but he stops short of endorsing it; instead, as I explain below, he proposes a form of idealizing presentist subjectivism that makes reference to the agent's future desires in its account of the relevant idealization.
14 By contrast, consider the democratic Humean theory defended by Manne (2016), on which other people’s desires can directly ground reasons for you to act. Even though this theory says that all reasons are grounded in desires, it strays from the basic subjectivist idea because it denies that what you have reason to do is determined solely by your desires. (Manne writes that she “would certainly want to try to take advantage of the possibility of holding that desires can provide reasons across times as well as across persons” (p. 132 n12). I therefore suspect that the problem for futurist subjectivism that I will be discussing would also arise for her view.)
16 Schroeder (2007a, p. 7) calls this the ‘Classical Argument’ for subjectivism. Heathwood (2011, p. 83) calls it the ‘motivation argument’.
there is a reason for you to do something only if you could be motivated to do it. Given how closely connected the constraint and subjectivism have historically been, some might conclude that futurist subjectivism is not a genuinely subjectivist view.

There are two reasons why this would be a mistake, however. First, it is not clear that the constraint, when properly understood, really is violated by futurist subjectivism. It is widely acknowledged that the constraint is plausible only if it is read as saying that there is a reason for you to do something only if you would be motivated to do it in certain idealized conditions, such as ones in which you are fully rational or ones in which you have deliberated soundly. As Sobel argues, however, it could be that full rationality or sound deliberation “involves caring about one’s future concerns.” If this is right, then a futurist subjectivist could respect the constraint by claiming that any action that would promote the satisfaction of one of your future desires is one that you would now be motivated to perform if you were suitably idealized.

Second, a theory of reasons can be genuinely subjectivist even if it violates the constraint. A striking fact about the recent literature is the degree to which the constraint and the argument that is based on it have fallen out of favor among subjectivists. Schroeder maintains that the argument is not “particularly good,” and he can be read as denying the constraint. Markovits and Sobel explicitly reject the constraint: they argue, for example, that you might have reason to deliberate better or to take steps to become more rational even though you would not be motivated to do either of these things if you were idealized in the relevant ways. As Sobel observes, ideal advisor views, on which you have reason to do what your idealized self would want your non-idealized self to do, are widely thought to be the most plausible, “state-of-the-art” subjectivist views even though they violate the constraint. Thus, even if futurist subjectivism is incompatible with the Williamsian constraint, this does not mean that it is not a genuine form of subjectivism.

18 Sobel (2011, p. 69) represents the constraint as claiming “that if someone has a reason to O, it must be possible for that person to be motivated to O via sound deliberation.” Markovits (2014, p. 37) represents it as claiming that “reasons must be capable of motivating the agents whose reasons they are, and will motivate them if they are rational.”
20 Though see Manne (2014) for a recent defense of the constraint. In light of what she writes in Manne (2016), I would not classify her as a subjectivist (see footnote 14), and I am not sure that she really accepts the constraint.
If the Williamsian constraint is not definitive of subjectivism, then what is? I believe that Sobel is correct when he writes that the dispute between subjectivists and objectivists is about whether “our favoring and disfavoring attitudes gild and stain the world with reason-providing status” or whether “our options already have the reason-providing status independently of our happening to go for some options and not for others.” A view on which a person’s present and future attitudes gild and stain the world with reason-providing status falls on the subjectivist side of this divide. Thus, in light of the aforementioned virtues of the view, subjectivists should find futurism appealing.

2. The Problem: Which Possible Future Desires Count?

We can now consider the problem that I want to discuss: assuming that futurist subjectivism is true, which of your many possible future desires ground reasons for you to do what would promote their satisfaction?

It might seem that, just as the possible present desires that can generate reasons for you to act now are the ones that you actually have, the possible future desires that can do this are the ones that you will actually have. This view, which we can call actualism, may seem so obvious that it might not be apparent that there is a real problem here. Remember, though, that which desires you will have in the future can depend on what you do now. Actualism does well enough in cases in which you will have the same desires no matter what you do now. However, as I will now explain, it has implausible implications about cases in which this is not true. Reflection on such cases reveals that futurist subjectivists must allow at least some non-actual future desires to generate present reasons. This is why the problem arises for futurists, even though no analogous problem arises for presentists.

Actualism has at least two serious defects. First, it implies that whether a possible future desire of yours generates a reason for you to do something—and, indeed, whether there is any reason at all for you to do it—can depend on whether you actually do it. Recall the case of the exotic dish, in

25 Actualism is so-called because it implies that the future desires that can ground reasons for you to do something now at the actual world are the ones that you will actually have. But perhaps a better name for it would be ‘same worldism’, since it says, more generally, that for any possible world \(W\) at which you exist, the future desires that can ground reasons for you to do something now at \(W\) are the ones that you will have at the very same world, \(W\). We must distinguish this view from the considerably less plausible view that, for any possible world \(W\) at which you exist, the future desires that can generate reasons for you to do something now at \(W\) are the ones that you will have at \(\emptyset\), the actual world. (See Lin (2017a) and Lin (2019) for discussions of same-world subjectivist theories of welfare rather than reasons.)
which I will want to be trying the dish if and only if I try it. Actualism implies that if I actually try the dish, then because I will actually desire to be trying it, this desire gives me a reason to try it. It also implies, however, that if I don’t actually try the dish, then since that desire will not be actual, it gives me no reason to try it. Suppose, further, that I currently have no desire whose satisfaction would be promoted by my trying the dish, and that if I don’t actually try it, I will never have any such desire. In that case, actualism says that there is some reason for me to try the dish if I try it, but no reason at all for me to try it if I don’t. Also recall the case of bootcamp, in which I will want to be a soldier if and only if I don’t go to bootcamp. Actualism implies that if I don’t actually go to bootcamp, then because I will actually desire to be a soldier, this desire gives me a reason to go to bootcamp. It also implies, however, that if I actually go to bootcamp, then since that desire will not be actual, it gives me no reason to go. If I now have no desire whose satisfaction would be promoted by my going to bootcamp and I will never have any such desire if I go, then actualism implies that there is no reason for me to go to bootcamp if I go, but some reason for me to go if I don’t go. Actualism therefore implies that in some cases, you have reason to do something if and only if you do it, while in others, you have reason to do something if and only if you don’t do it.

Besides being intuitively strange, this implication appears to commit actualism to implausible views about deliberation. Suppose that I am offered the exotic dish. I accept actualism and I know that I will have a desire whose satisfaction would be promoted by my trying the dish if and only if I try it, so I believe that whether there is any reason for me to try the dish depends on whether I will try it. Thus, if I have no beliefs about whether I will try the dish, I am also agnostic about whether there is any reason for me to try it, and I am consequently unable to weigh what I take to be reasons for and against my trying it. If we add the plausible premise that deliberating about whether to do something requires weighing what one takes to be reasons for and against doing it, it follows that I am unable to deliberate about whether to try the dish. But it is implausible to suppose that I could be precluded from deliberating about whether to do something precisely because I am agnostic about whether I will do it and I accept the correct view about which of my future desires can generate reasons for me

26 As I admitted earlier, this supposition is unrealistic, since a psychologically typical agent will have a desire for pleasure. It is widely recognized, however, that in light of all of the things that people typically desire, the distinctive implications of subjectivist theories of reasons are most clearly seen in cases involving subjects with unusually few desires. Such cases are relevant even though they are unrealistic because the correct theory of reasons is supposed to be a necessary truth. See Parfit (2011), pp. 76-77, and the cases described in Lin (2015). Street (2009) agrees that subjectivist views should be tested against such cases, but she argues that they do better when so tested than is often assumed. I am not persuaded, but a discussion of her arguments would be beyond the scope of this paper.
to do something.\footnote{The objection is not that actualism implies that an actualist can be unable to deliberate because there is something that she is agnostic about. Clearly, agnosticism about some subject matters can preclude deliberation. If I want to drink gin, I know that I have no other desire whose satisfaction I would promote by drinking what’s in this glass, and I am agnostic about whether the glass contains gin, then provided that I am a presentist subjectivist, I cannot deliberate about whether to drink what’s in this glass. This is no objection to presentist subjectivism, since there is nothing implausible about the view that deliberation requires certain kinds of information. The objection is that actualism implies that an actualist can be unable to deliberate about whether to perform a given action because she is agnostic about whether she will perform that very action. It is implausible that deliberation about whether to perform a given action requires information about whether one will perform that very action. This objection does not apply to presentist subjectivism, since whether your doing something would promote the satisfaction of one of your present desires does not depend on whether you do it. For a similar argument, see Bykvist (2006), pp. 273-74.} This suggests that actualism is wrong to imply that there are situations in which whether there is any reason for me to do something depends on whether I do it.

An actualist might respond by rejecting the premise that deliberating about whether to do something requires weighing what one takes to be reasons for and against doing it. But even if she can propose a conception of deliberation that evades the foregoing argument, she faces a different problem: she must license forms of deliberation that are intuitively unacceptable. If I can deliberate about doing something while being agnostic about whether there is any reason for me to do it, then the following claim is surely true: other things being equal, the greater my confidence that there is some reason for me to do something, the more confident I should be that I should do it. Now, if actualism is true, then the more likely it is that I will try the exotic dish, the more likely it is that there is a reason for me to try it, whereas the more likely it is that I will go to bootcamp, the less likely it is that there is a reason for me to go. Thus, actualism implies that, other things being equal, the more confident I am that I will try the exotic dish, the more confident I should be that I should try it, whereas the more confident I am that I will go to bootcamp, the less confident I should be that I should go. But it is implausible that my views about whether I should do something should depend in this way on how confident I am that I will do it.

Furthermore, suppose that I have a weak reason not to go to bootcamp that is grounded in a weak desire of mine to read a book that I could not bring with me to bootcamp. Suppose, also, that the desire to be a soldier that I will acquire if I do not go to bootcamp will be much stronger than this weak desire to read the book. In that case, at least if we combine it with the plausible view that the strength of a reason generated by a desire is (other things equal) proportional to the strength of that desire\footnote{Schroeder (2007, ch. 7) argues that subjectivists should reject this view, but I am unpersuaded: see Rieder (2016) and Sobel (2016a), ch. 15.}, actualism says that regardless of what I do in this case, I have failed to do what I had most
reason to do. If I go to bootcamp, then because I will never want to be a soldier and will never have any other desire whose satisfaction would be promoted by my going to bootcamp, I have no reason to go but some reason (provided by my desire to read the book) not to go. Thus, if I go, then I have most reason not to go. If I don’t go, however, then on the assumption that the difference in strength between my future desire to be a soldier and my present desire to read the book is sufficiently large, I have most reason to go: for I have a reason to go (provided by the former desire) that is stronger than my reason not to go (provided by the latter desire). Thus, actualism implies that there can be situations in which, no matter what you do, you do what you have most reason not to do. This is hard to believe.29

The second main problem with actualism is that it is unable to recognize some reasons that futurist subjectivists clearly should be able to recognize. Suppose that I will not try the exotic dish and will therefore never acquire a desire to try it. Because my possible future desire to try the dish will not be actual, actualism entails that it gives me no reason to try the dish. Surely, though, there is a reason for me to try it. An actualist might attempt to accommodate this by identifying some other actual desire of mine, present or future, whose satisfaction I would promote by trying it (e.g., a desire for pleasure). We can stipulate, however, that I never actually have any such desire, or we can imagine a more unusual case that serves the same purpose (e.g., one in which a creature who never actually feels pleasure and never actually desires it passes up an opportunity to do something pleasant that would have given it a desire for pleasure). Even if I have no actual desire, present or future, whose satisfaction would be promoted by my trying the exotic dish, there surely is a reason for me to try it. The fact that actualism implies otherwise is a serious strike against it.

Some might maintain that any committed subjectivist would reject the intuition that there is a reason for me to try the exotic dish in this case. But in light of what I said about the motivations for futurist subjectivism, there seems to be no good reason to think this. Perhaps I would fail to be motivated to try the dish even if I were suitably idealized and I knew that I would acquire a desire to be trying it if I were to try it. A proponent of the Williamsian constraint might therefore claim that there might be no reason for me to try the dish. But as I explained earlier, it is arguable that I would now care about the satisfaction of my future desires if I were suitably idealized. Thus, the claim that there is a reason for me to try the dish may be compatible with the Williamsian constraint. Even if it isn’t, however, it

does not follow that any committed subjectivist would reject it: as I said earlier, the constraint is not definitive of subjectivism, and some of the most prominent contemporary subjectivists deem it false. If, as I have argued, futurist subjectivism is genuinely subjectivist, then it is not contrary to the spirit of subjectivism to claim that the future desire to be trying the dish that I will have if I try it gives me a reason to try it, even though I would not be motivated to try it if I were suitably idealized and my trying it would not promote the satisfaction of any of my present desires. Indeed, if we take seriously the fact that we are temporally extended agents whose future desires are no less genuinely ours, it should be plausible by subjectivists’ own lights that I have reason to try the dish. Actualism’s failure to accommodate this reason in the case in which I don’t actually try the dish is therefore a failure by futurist subjectivists’ own lights.30

The case in which I don’t actually try the exotic dish is not the only case that actualism gets wrong. It also says the wrong thing about one version of the Agony Argument. If I don’t actually perform the action that prevents my future agony, then because I will actually be in agony while desiring not to be in agony, and because this is a desire whose satisfaction I would promote by performing that action, actualism implies that there is a reason for me to perform that action. But actualism implies that there may be no reason for me to perform that action if I actually perform it. For if I perform it, I will not be in agony, and I will continue to lack any desire not to be in agony.31 It could be that I now have no desire whose satisfaction would be promoted by my performing the action and that I will never have any such desire if I perform it. If so, then actualism says that if I perform the action

30 Of course, an objectivist who thinks that pleasure is good and that I have reason to promote valuable states of affairs would agree that I have reason to try the dish. But this doesn’t show that only objectivists can claim that I have reason to do this: objectivists and subjectivists can agree that I have reason to do it. Notice, too, that one cannot defend actualism by invoking the Williamsian constraint. Actualism implies that if I will actually try the dish, then because I will actually desire to be trying it, there is a reason for me to try it now—even though I have no desire at present whose satisfaction would be promoted by my trying it. Thus, if I could fail to be motivated to promote the satisfaction of my future desires even if I were suitably idealized, then actualism violates the Williamsian constraint in the case in which I will actually try the dish. Like all other futurists, actualists must either reject the Williamsian constraint or insist that the kind of idealization that it invokes would ensure that I now care about my future desires.

31 I assume that, although Parfit does not say this explicitly, the agent in his argument lacks a standing desire not to be in agony—i.e., a desire that will persist into the future and whose object, at any time at which he has it, is that he not be in agony at that time. For if he has such a desire, then since it is arguable that its future satisfaction would be promoted by his preventing his future agony, one could argue that even non-idealizing presentist subjectivists can say that there is a reason for him to prevent his future agony. Because Parfit clearly intended to identify a reason that subjectivists of that kind cannot accommodate, I think that we should block that argument altogether by understanding the agent as lacking any such desire. (Notice that nothing about the nature of agony suggests that the agent must have such a desire. It may be in the nature of agony that one must desire not to be in agony while one is in it, but it is not plausible that one must always desire not to be in agony even when one is not in agony.)
that prevents my future agony, I have thereby done something that there is no reason for me to do. This is implausible.

The problem is not just that actualism fails to recognize reasons that clearly do exist. The problem is that these are precisely the sorts of reasons that subjectivists would hope to recognize by allowing future desires to ground present reasons. One of the main motivations for futurism is the hope that it enables subjectivists to answer the Agony Argument. Moreover, my reason to try the exotic dish seems like exactly the sort of reason that appealing to future desires should allow a subjectivist to recognize. Futurist subjectivism cannot do what it is meant to do if it is conjoined with actualism.

Futurist subjectivists should not accept actualism. Instead, they should maintain that at least some possible future desires that you will not actually have can generate reasons for you to do things now. This is why they must tell us which of your many possible future desires can ground reasons for you to perform actions at present. Because futurist subjectivism has not yet been developed in any detail, this problem has not been discussed. But it should be, since the prospects of the view depend on whether an adequate solution to it can be found.

A closely analogous problem arises for some idealizing subjectivist views. Such theories are typically assumed to take a presentist form, in that they are thought to say that the desires that are relevant to what you have reason to do now are the ones that you would now have if you were idealized. But in response to objections like the Agony Argument, some subjectivists have proposed idealizing views that are indirectly futurist, in that they say that if you were suitably idealized, you would now care about the satisfaction of your future desires. Sobel endorses an ideal advisor view on which (i) what you have reason to do now is what you would now want your non-idealized self to do now if you had engaged in “ideal procedural deliberation,” and (ii) one principle governing such deliberation is that “one should now care about what one will later care about.” Markovits endorses a Kantian subjectivist view on which, roughly speaking, (i) what you have reason to do depends on the ends you would have if you were fully procedurally rational and (ii) if you were fully procedurally rational, you would value all rational beings, including the future stages of yourself, and share their ends.

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Williams endorsed an idealizing subjectivist view on which what there is reason for you to do is what you would be motivated to do after deliberating soundly from the motivations that you already have. While he did not claim that sound deliberation results in your caring about what you will care about in the future, his notoriously indeterminate account of sound deliberation left this possibility open. A follower of Williams could therefore endorse an indirectly futurist version of his view, on which if you had deliberated soundly from your existing motivations, you would be motivated to promote the satisfaction of your future desires.

Like futurist subjectivism, these views seem to be able to deliver the intuitively correct verdict about the Agony Argument on the grounds that if I will feel agony in the future, I will then have a strong desire not to be in agony. However, they face an exactly similar problem: they must tell us which of your many possible future desires you would now care about if you were appropriately idealized. (In Markovits’s case, the question is which of your possible future selves are such that if you were fully rational, you would share their ends. For example, if you do not try the exotic dish, is the possible future self that would result from your trying the dish one whose ends full rationality requires you to share?) On pain of having the implausible implications that I described above, they cannot endorse actualism. They must propose a different solution.

Indeed, I suspect that any idealizing subjectivist view that can say the right thing about the Agony Argument will be committed to indirect futurism. After all, giving the agent full information would not ensure that he now wants to avoid the agony: we needn’t suppose that the agent Parfit describes doesn’t know what the agony will be like or hasn’t vividly imagined it. Although there are other ways to get the right result without building a reference to the agent’s future desires into the account of the idealization (e.g., claiming that full rationality involves being motivated to prevent disvaluable outcomes or to avoid agony as such), these strategies seem at odds with the spirit of subjectivism. If this is right, then any idealizing subjectivist view that hopes to say the right thing about the Agony Argument will face a version of the problem that I have described.

I will focus on the problem as it arises for futurist subjectivism. But because I think that the most natural solutions to the version of the problem that arises for indirectly futurist idealizing views are closely analogous to the most natural solutions to the original version of the problem, I think my

discussion will bear on the prospects of idealizing views of this sort. I will briefly return to this issue near the end of the paper.

3. Other Natural but Unsatisfactory Solutions

I will now consider the other most natural solutions to the problem and argue that none of them is satisfactory. Then, in the next section, I will propose a less obvious but more promising solution.

3.1 Possibilism

We have seen that futurist subjectivists must allow at least some desires that you could have in the future to generate reasons for you to act in certain ways now, even though you will not actually have those desires. After all, they should think that even if I prevent my future agony, my possible but non-actual future desire not to be in agony gives me a reason to prevent my agony; and they should also think that even if I do not try the exotic dish, my possible but non-actual future desire to try it gives me a reason to do so. The simplest way for them to do this would be to endorse possibilism, on which every possible future desire of yours can generate a reason for you to promote its satisfaction now. A futurist subjectivist who accepts this view would claim that there is a reason for you to do \( A \) now just if this would promote the satisfaction of a desire (i) that you have now or (ii) that you will have in the future at a possible world whose past and present match those of the actual world. This view says the right things about the Agony Argument and the exotic dish. It also does not imply that whether there is a reason for you to do something can depend on whether you actually do it.

Possibilism is too permissive, however. Among the possible worlds whose past and present match those of the actual world, there is a distant world at which I will want to learn to play the flute. But it surely doesn’t follow that I have a reason to buy a flute now, even though this would promote my learning to play the flute. At all of the worlds hereabouts in modal space, I will never want to learn to play the flute. Indeed, we may suppose that I will never want to do this no matter what I do now: if I were to buy a flute now, I would never acquire this desire, and if I were not to buy one now, I would never acquire it either.\(^{36}\) Possibilism implies that because my buying a flute would promote

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\(^{36}\) On the view of counterfactuals developed in Hájek (unpublished), these counterfactuals are false because, whether I buy a flute or not, I might acquire the relevant desire. But even if Hájek is right, my main argument against possibilism
the satisfaction of a future desire that I have at some possible world whose past and present match those of the actual world, there is a reason for me to buy a flute now. But intuitively, there is some further condition that a possible future desire of mine must meet in order to generate a reason for me to do something now. Possibilism allows too many possible future desires to ground present reasons.

3.2 Concordantism

We need an account that is less restrictive than actualism but less permissive than possibilism. The most natural candidate is concordantism, on which the possible future desires that can ground a reason for you to do something are the ones that you would have if you were to do it. Is there any reason for me to buy a flute even though I presently have no desire whose satisfaction would be promoted by my doing this? According to concordantism, the answer depends on whether I would later have such a desire if I were to buy a flute now. If I would later have a desire to learn the flute (or, say, a desire to have one on display in my living room), then there is a reason for me to do this. But if I would never acquire any desire whose satisfaction would thereby be promoted if I were to buy a flute now, then I have no reason to do this.

This view avoids the excesses of possibilism. The fact that there is some possible world where I will have a desire whose satisfaction I would promote by performing a particular action (and whose past and present match those of the actual world) does not, on this view, entail that there is a reason for me to perform that action: what matters is whether I will have such a desire at the closest world at which I perform the action.

Concordantism also avoids some of actualism’s problems. It implies that because I would acquire a desire to be trying the exotic dish if I were to try it, there is a reason for me to try it—even if I don’t actually do so and I have no present desire whose satisfaction I would promote by doing so. It also doesn’t imply that what reasons there are for me to do something can depend on whether I do it. We saw that actualism implies this by considering versions of the exotic dish and bootcamp cases in which (i) I presently have no desire whose satisfaction I would promote by performing the relevant

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still stands: it is intuitively implausible that every possible future desire of mine, no matter how remote the worlds at which I have it, can generate a reason for me to promote their satisfaction.
action and (ii) whether I will ever have any such desire depends precisely on whether I perform it. In that version of the exotic dish case, it is true—regardless of whether I try the dish—that if I were to try it, I would have a future desire whose satisfaction I would thereby promote. In that version of the bootcamp case, it is true—regardless of whether I go to bootcamp—that if I were to go, I would have no future desire whose satisfaction I would thereby promote. Thus, concordantism implies that in those versions of the cases, my reasons do not depend on what I do: I have some reason to try the dish regardless of whether I try it and no reason to go to bootcamp regardless of whether I go.

Some might worry that concordantism permits an objectionable kind of bootstrapping. Suppose that I have a magic potion which would, were I to drink it, make me want to turn on radios. Moreover, suppose that my drinking it would promote the satisfaction of this desire (e.g., by causing a radio to materialize before me). Concordantism implies that because my drinking the potion would promote the satisfaction of this desire, there is a reason for me to drink it. This might seem counterintuitive. But remember that we are trying to formulate the best version of futurism on behalf of subjectivists, who claim that our pro-attitudes “gild and stain the world with reason-providing status” regardless of the natures of their objects. It would go against the spirit of subjectivism to say, as an objectivist might, that because the object of my desire to turn on radios is worthless, there is no reason for me to promote its satisfaction. Thus, the objection to concordantism’s verdict about this case cannot be based on the worthlessness or pointlessness of turning on radios. We should also remember that, although I have been eliding this point for brevity’s sake, most subjectivists would say that reasons are generated only by desires of the right kind (e.g., intrinsic desires, as opposed to extrinsic ones, or “genuine attraction” desires, as opposed to merely behavioral ones). Some might have the intuition that there is no reason for me to drink the potion because, as they are imagining the case, the desire to turn on radios that I would thereby acquire is a desire of the wrong kind (e.g., a mere behavioral compulsion to perform an action that I do not find appealing). But if that desire is of the wrong kind, then concordantism agrees that it gives me no reason to drink the potion. What it implies is that if my drinking the potion would give me a desire of the right kind to turn on radios, then that desire gives me a reason to drink the potion. If we hold firmly in mind the stipulation that the desire would be of the right kind (e.g., the sort of desire that one has toward things that one is genuinely attracted to), then this implication does not seem objectionable by futurist subjectivists’ lights.

39 After all, subjectivists would agree that if I now desire to turn on radios, this gives me a reason to drink the potion.
It could be that those who object to the kind of bootstrapping that concordantism permits in this case are motivated by the Williamsian constraint. Their worry, perhaps, is that because I might lack any motivation to drink the potion even if I were suitably idealized and I knew that my drinking it would give me, and promote the satisfaction of, a new desire, subjectivists should deny that I have reason to drink the potion. But as before, it is not clear that the claim that I have reason to drink the potion really violates the constraint: perhaps I would now care about the satisfaction of that possible future desire if I were suitably idealized. Besides, as I argued earlier, subjectivists need not accept that constraint. The case of the magic potion is analogous to that of the exotic dish: in both cases, I can perform an action that would give me a desire whose satisfaction my performing that action would promote. It seems to me that if futurist subjectivism is true, then it is plausible that I have reason to perform the action in both cases. From the perspective of that theory, it seems sensible to act in a way that would promote your getting things that you would want if you were to act in that way. Furthermore, even if the fact that concordantism permits this kind of bootstrapping is a strike against it, this gives us no reason to prefer actualism or possibilism. For possibilism posits a reason wherever concordantism does, and actualism implies that so long as I actually drink the potion, my future desire to turn on radios gives me a reason to drink it.

However, concordantism does have a serious defect: it does not say the right thing about the Agony Argument. Futurist subjectivists hope to say that the future desire not to be in agony that I would acquire while feeling agony grounds a reason for me to prevent my agony. But on concordantism,

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40 An anonymous referee notes that resistance to the kind of bootstrapping that concordantism permits might be driven not by the Williamsian constraint but by worries about alienation. Worries of this sort motivate subjectivist theories of welfare, according to which the particular facts or events that are good for you have that status in virtue of how they are related to the desires (or other pro-attitudes) that you have or would have if you were idealized in the right ways. As Railton (1986, p. 9) famously puts it, what is intrinsically good for a person must resonate with him in the sense that it has “a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone’s good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him.” What is objectionable about the claim that I have a reason to drink the magic potion, it might be argued, is that the prospect of turning on radios is alienating to me. My reply to this suggestion is that, whether it concerns welfare or reasons, how the resonance (or non-alienation) constraint should best be understood is an open question. Futurists could plausibly argue that the kind of bootstrapping that concordantism permits does not violate the constraint when it is properly understood. If the constraint is understood in terms of what you would now care about if you were suitably idealized, then a point that I made in connection with the Williamsian constraint can be repeated here: perhaps I would now care about my possible future desire to turn on radios if I were idealized in the relevant ways. Moreover, futurists could argue that the kinds of considerations that motivate their view also suggest that the resonance constraint should be understood in terms of what the agent cares about at present or in the future. See Lin (2017b, pp. 178-80) for a discussion of whether the version of the constraint that concerns welfare must be understood synchronically (i.e., as claiming that nothing is good for you at a particular time unless you have a pro-attitude toward it at the very same time).
this is not true. After all, if I were to perform the action that prevents my agony, then I would never experience the episode of agony, so I would continue to lack any desire not to be in agony. Thus, the future desire not to be in agony is not one that I would have if I were to perform the action. If concordantism is true, then the fact that my performing the action would promote the satisfaction of this desire doesn’t imply that there is a reason for me to perform it. Indeed, it could be that if I were to perform it, I would have no future desire whose satisfaction would thereby be promoted. Thus, according to concordantism, it could be that there is no reason for me to prevent my future agony. This is precisely the implausible verdict that presentist subjectivism delivers about this case.

3.3 Discordantism

The mirror image of concordantism is discordantism, the view that the possible future desires that are eligible to ground a reason for you to do A are those that you would have if you were not to do A. This view does say the right thing about the Agony Argument, since the desire not to be in agony that I would acquire if I were in agony is a possible future desire that I would have precisely if I were not to perform the action that prevents the agony. But that is the view’s only virtue. It is even more obviously wrong than actualism is about the version of the exotic dish case in which I don’t have a present desire whose satisfaction I would promote by trying the dish. Whereas actualism merely says that there is no reason for me to try the exotic dish if I don’t actually try it, discordantism says that there is no reason for me to try it even if I actually do try it and later desire to be trying it. For if I were not to try the dish, I would not acquire a desire to try it (or any other desire whose satisfaction would be promoted by my trying it). This view also implies that because I would acquire a desire to be a soldier if I were not to go to bootcamp, there is a reason for me to go to bootcamp. Moreover, it is bizarre and unmotivated—except, perhaps, by a desire to answer the Agony Argument.

3.4 Invariantism

Finally, consider invariantism, on which the possible future desires that generate reasons for you to do something that would promote their satisfaction are those that you will have whether or not you do it—i.e., those such that (i) you would have them if you were to do it and (ii) you would also have them if you were not to do it.
Some might like this view because it avoids the kind of bootstrapping that concordantism permits. Because the desire to turn on radios is not a desire that I will have whether or not I drink the magic potion, invariantism does not imply that it gives me a reason to drink the potion. But as I argued, it should not seem so implausible by the lights of futurist subjectivists that I have reason to drink the potion. Moreover, notice that invariantism says the wrong thing about the version of the exotic dish case in which I now have no desire whose satisfaction I would promote by trying the dish and I will have such a desire if and only if I try it: it implies that because I will never have such any desire if I don’t try the dish, there is no reason for me to try it.

In other respects, invariantism is on a par with concordantism. Since it isn’t true that I will want to be a soldier whether or not I go to bootcamp, it doesn’t imply that I have a reason to go. But it is also unable to answer the Agony Argument. My possible future desire not to be in agony is not a desire that I will have whether or not I prevent my future agony. Thus, invariantism implies that there may be no reason for me to prevent my future agony.

3.5 Summary

I have considered what appear to be the most natural solutions to our problem. None of them is satisfactory. Possibilism and discordantism can answer the Agony Argument, but only at the cost of being far too permissive (in the former case), of saying something counterintuitive about the exotic dish (in the latter case), or of saying something counterintuitive about bootcamp (in both cases). Invariantism can neither answer the Agony Argument nor say the right thing about the exotic dish. Concordantism is otherwise the most plausible of these views, but it is vitiated by its inability to answer the Agony Argument.

4. A More Promising Solution: Extended Concordantism

I will now propose a more promising solution. Recall that much of the literature on subjectivism characterizes the view in general terms instead of precisely specifying the relation that must obtain between an action and a desire that grounds a reason for it. However, those subjectivists who do attempt to precisely specify this relation endorse what we might call the standard biconditional: there is a reason for you to do something if and only if your doing it would promote the satisfaction of one
of your desires. Unlike the solutions that I considered above, my proposal requires subjectivists to formulate their theory in a manner that is inconsistent with that biconditional. The appropriate formulation will suggest itself once we consider how an objectivist theory of reasons could generate the intuitively correct verdict about Parfit’s agony example.

Consider the value-based theory of reasons, on which the existence of reasons for action is explained not by facts about desires, but by facts about the values of states of affairs. If this theory were to accept the value-based analogue of the standard biconditional, it would say that there is a reason for you to perform an action if and only if (and because) your performing it would promote a valuable state of affairs. Notice, though, that when it is formulated in this way, the theory seems unable to guarantee that there is a reason for me to prevent my future agony in Parfit’s example. While agony is disvaluable, being agony-free is merely neutral rather than positively valuable. Thus, while I would prevent a disvaluable state of affairs if I were to prevent the agony, I would not necessarily promote a valuable state of affairs. It therefore seems that, in order to say the right thing about future agony, the value-based theory must accept something like the following sufficient condition: if your not doing \( A \) would promote a disvaluable state of affairs, then there is a reason for you to do \( A \).

Similar remarks apply to hybrid theories.\(^4\) It seems that a hybrid of subjectivism and the value-based theory could not deliver the right verdict about Parfit’s example if it claimed that there is a reason for you to do \( A \) if and only if (and because) your doing \( A \) would promote either the satisfaction of one of your desires or a valuable state of affairs. To say the right thing about future agony, it would have to endorse something like the sufficient condition that I just suggested.

These points have not received enough emphasis in the literature. This is partly because, as is the case with discussions of subjectivism, discussions of objectivist and hybrid theories often take place at a fairly high level of abstraction. Maguire, who has written the most detailed defense of the value-based theory, might accept the sufficient condition that I suggested above. For he claims that if your doing something would promote a disvaluable state of affairs, this generates a reason against your doing it.\(^5\) It is natural to suppose, and Maguire would likely agree, that if there is a reason against your doing something, then there is a reason for you not to do it. Thus, he would likely agree that if

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\(^4\) Hybrid theories have been defended by, e.g., Paul and Morton (2014) and Behrends (2015).

your performing an action would promote a disvaluable state of affairs, this grounds a reason for you not to perform it. If he were to maintain that not performing an action is itself an action and that not not performing an action is just performing it, then he would be led to endorse the sufficient condition that I suggested: if your not doing $A$ would promote a disvaluable state of affairs, then there is a reason for you to do $A$. However, Maguire does not explicitly endorse this claim or explain its importance. Indeed, at one point, he proceeds as though the value-based theory implies that there is a reason for you to do $A$ only if this would promote a valuable state of affairs.\footnote{He writes: “If there is a reason to $A$, then by the Value-Based Theory of Reasons, $A$ promotes some valuable state of affairs” (2016, p. 244).} But as I have argued, the theory would be vulnerable to the Agony Argument if it were understood in this way.

This discussion suggests that in some cases, a theory that explains the existence of reasons for action in terms of the promotion of certain kinds of states of affairs cannot account for your reason to do something by looking only at whether your doing it would promote a state of affairs of the sort that is positively valenced on that theory: instead, it must account for your reason by looking at whether your not doing the relevant action would promote a state of affairs that is negatively valenced on that theory. The formulation of subjectivism that my proposal requires is driven by that thought. Recall that, according to the standard biconditional, there is a reason for you to do something if and only if your doing it would promote the satisfaction of one of your desires. Instead of treating this condition as necessary and sufficient, my formulation of subjectivism treats it as merely sufficient, and it endorses an additional sufficient condition: if your not doing $A$ would promote the frustration of one of your desires, then there is a reason for you to do $A$.

A futurist version of the resulting view would have to tell us which possible future desires are such that, if your doing $A$ now would promote their satisfaction, then they generate a reason for you to do $A$ now. But it would also have to answer the analogous question on the frustration side: which possible future desires are such that, if your not doing $A$ now would promote their frustration, then they ground a reason for you to do $A$ now? Concordantism gives us an answer to the first question. The view that I will call \textit{extended concordantism} also gives an analogous answer to the second question: it says that just as the possible future desires whose satisfaction matters are the ones that you would have if you were to do $A$, the ones whose frustration matters are those that you would have if you were not to do $A$. (Suppose that if I were not to bring my umbrella with me, I would later be caught
in the rain and would have a frustrated desire not to be drenched. On this view, the fact that my not bringing the umbrella would promote the frustration of this desire grounds a reason for me to bring the umbrella.) If extended concordantism is true, then futurist subjectivism implies these claims:

(1) If your doing \( A \) at \( t \) would promote the satisfaction of a desire that you would have at a time later than \( t \) if you were to do \( A \) at \( t \), then there is a reason for you to do \( A \) at \( t \).

(2) If your not doing \( A \) at \( t \) would promote the frustration of a desire that you would have at a time later than \( t \) if you were not to do \( A \) at \( t \), then there is a reason for you to do \( A \) at \( t \).

By (2), it follows that there is a reason for me to perform the action that would prevent my future agony: for if I were not to perform this action, I would thereby promote the frustration of a desire that I would have at a later time if I were not to perform it (viz., the desire not to be in agony that I would acquire when feeling agony). By (1), it follows that there is a reason for me to eat the exotic dish: for if I were to eat it, I would acquire a desire to be eating it.\(^{44}\)

The sufficient condition on reasons that I am proposing on behalf of subjectivists—namely, that there is a reason for you to do \( A \) if your not doing it would promote the frustration of one of your desires—has not been considered in the literature. As I said, existing discussions either abstain from the difficult task of formulating subjectivism precisely or assume that it should endorse the standard biconditional. Indeed, that biconditional is entailed by the most detailed defense of subjectivism to date, which analyzes reasons for action as follows:

For [a proposition] \( R \) to be a reason for \( X \) to do \( A \) is for there to be some \( p \) such that \( X \) has a desire whose object is \( p \), and the truth of \( R \) is part of what explains why \( X \)'s doing \( A \) promotes \( p \).\(^{45}\)

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\(^{44}\) An anonymous referee observes that a futurist subjectivist who accepts extended concordantism might want to affirm stronger variants on (1) and (2) in which the qualifier “at a time later than \( t \)” is replaced by “at \( t \) or at a later time.” After all, suppose that my hair is being brushed and that if I were not gripping it by my scalp, I would now be in pain. It is plausible that I have reason to grip my hair in virtue of the fact that if I were not to do this, I would thereby promote the frustration of a desire that I would now have (viz., a desire not to be in pain). My claim that futurist subjectivists who accept extended concordantism would affirm (1) and (2) is, of course, compatible with the view that they should also affirm those stronger variants on (1) and (2).

\(^{45}\) Schroeder (2007a), p. 59. Schroeder proceeds as if promoting the object of a desire is the same thing as promoting its satisfaction.
But that sufficient condition is well-motivated and consistent with the spirit of subjectivism. It may even seem obvious, on further reflection. Desire frustration is the opposite of desire satisfaction, and a reason against an action is the opposite of a reason for it. If the fact that your doing $A$ would promote the satisfaction of one of your desires grounds a reason for you to do $A$, then it is natural to suppose that the fact that your doing $A$ would promote the frustration of one of your desires grounds a reason against your doing $A$. But as I mentioned above, a reason against your doing $A$ presumably entails a reason for you not to do $A$. Thus, what subjectivists should believe about reasons against implies that if your doing $A$ would promote the frustration of one of your desires, then there is a reason for you not to do $A$. Assuming that not performing an action is an action, this entails the relevant sufficient condition: if your not doing $A$ would promote the frustration of one of your desires, then there is a reason for you to do $A$. I would wager that most subjectivists would be willing to accept this condition, at least if they were drawn to futurism and aware of the problem that I have been discussing. Those subjectivists who have not precisely specified the way in which an action must be related to a desire that grounds a reason for it would presumably see no reason to reject this condition. And even those subjectivists who have endorsed the standard biconditional might decide, on reflection, to withdraw that endorsement and accept this condition.

Note that accepting that sufficient condition does not obviate the need to appeal to future desires. In Parfit’s example, I presently have no desire—not even a standing desire to avoid agony—whose frustration would be promoted by my not performing the act that would prevent my future agony. Thus, presentist subjectivists cannot answer the Agony Argument even if they accept that condition. But if futurist subjectivists accept it, they can.

Extended concordantism is much more promising than the solutions that we considered previously. Nevertheless, it does have at least two problems. First, like concordantism, it implies that there is a

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46 Snedegar (2018) argues that a reason against doing $A$ is not just a reason for not doing $A$, and he would also reject the weaker claim that a reason against doing $A$ entails a reason for not doing $A$. His argument is that I can have a reason against doing $A$ even if not doing $A$ is not among my options: if my only options are the mutually incompatible actions $A$, $B$, and $C$, for example, then since not doing $A$ is not among my options, I cannot have a reason for not doing $A$—even though I might very well have a reason against doing $A$. It seems to me, however, that not doing $A$ cannot fail to be among my options if my options include actions that are incompatible with $A$. After all, if $B$ is one of my options and it is incompatible with $A$, then doing $B$ is a way of not doing $A$. If I can stay at home or go to the movies, for example, then since going to the movies is one way of not staying at home, not staying at home is one of my options. Thus, pace Snedegar, I see no reason to reject the plausible claim that a reason against doing $A$ entails a reason for not doing $A$. 

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reason for me to drink the magic potion that would give me a desire to turn on radios and would also promote the satisfaction of this desire. Some might find this implausible. As I explained earlier, however, it seems to me that futurist subjectivists should not recoil from this implication.

The second problem with the view is that, like discordantism, it implies that there is a reason for me to go to bootcamp. After all, if I were not to go, I would thereby promote the frustration of a desire that I would acquire if I were not to go (viz., the desire to be a soldier). But perhaps it would not be intolerably implausible to claim that there is some reason for me to go. On the most natural way of fleshing out the example, the desire to be a soldier that I would later acquire if I were not to go is a mere whim. If so, then since it is plausible that weaker and briefer desires generate weaker reasons (other things being equal), my reason to go to bootcamp, if such a reason exists, is very weak. And as Schroeder has argued, it is difficult to tell the difference between a case in which there is no reason at all for me to do something and one in which I have a very weak reason to do it.47 On the other hand, if we stipulate that the desire would be extremely strong and long-lasting, then it begins to seem plausible that I have reason to go. Indeed, now that extended concordantism is in view, this should seem more plausible than it did when we were considering discordantism. For that view gave an implausible explanation of why I have reason to go: that going would help me get something that I would want only if I were not to go. Extended concordantism offers a more credible explanation: that going would help me avoid some desire frustration that would otherwise befall me.48

I am inclined to think that extended concordantism is a minimally adequate solution to our problem in the following sense. If the only available solutions were actualism, possibilism, concordantism, discordantism, and invariantism, then subjectivists would have little or nothing to gain, on balance, by endorsing futurism instead of presentism. But if subjectivists accept extended concordantism, then they have much to gain by becoming futurists: they can answer the Agony Argument and say the right thing about cases like that of the exotic dish, apparently merely at the cost of accepting a

47 Schroeder (2007), ch. 5. When I argued earlier that actualism implies, about a certain version of the bootcamp case, that I cannot avoid doing what I have most reason not to do, I assumed that going to bootcamp would not frustrate any of my desires other than a weak desire to read a book that I can’t bring to bootcamp. An anonymous referee notes that if we suppose, more realistically, that going to bootcamp would promote the frustration of a number of relatively strong desires of mine (e.g., a desire not to be tired, a desire not to be berated by the drill sergeant), then even though extended concordantism implies that there is some reason for me to go, it will likely also imply that there is even more reason for me not to go. This lessens the cost to extended concordantism of its implication that I have reason to go.

48 Remember that my main objections to discordantism were that it is bizarre and unmotivated and that it cannot say the right thing about cases like that of the exotic dish. Thus, even if the view’s implication about the bootcamp example is acceptable, it remains highly implausible.
few somewhat counterintuitive claims. Thus, extended concordantism keeps the promise of futurism alive in the face of the problem that I introduced.

Of course, some might find this view’s implications about the bootcamp case unacceptable. Others might recoil from the kind of bootstrapping that it licenses in examples like that of the magic potion. The view could also be vulnerable to objections that I have not noticed. Whether my solution to the problem is acceptable on balance, and whether there are better solutions to be found, are matters that warrant further investigation.

4.1 Disjunctivism

Before I conclude my discussion of extended concordantism, let me mention a view that might seem extensionally equivalent to it when conjoined with the standard biconditional. On this view, which we can call disjunctivism, a possible future desire whose satisfaction you would promote by doing \( A \) generates a reason for you to do \( A \) if and only if either (i) you would have this desire if you were to do \( A \) or (ii) you would have this desire if you were not to do \( A \). This view says the right thing about the exotic dish, since if I were to try the dish, I would acquire a desire to be trying it. It also says the right thing about the Agony Argument, since if I were not to prevent my future agony, I would later acquire a desire not to be in agony—one whose satisfaction I would promote if I were to prevent my future agony. Finally, it says that there is a reason for me to go to bootcamp, since if I were not to go, I would later acquire a desire to be a soldier—a desire whose satisfaction I would promote by going. Why should futurist subjectivists accept the sufficient condition that I proposed if they can stick with the standard biconditional and endorse disjunctivism instead?

Although the two views get the same results in the cases that we have considered, it is not clear that they really are extensionally equivalent. Whether they are depends on whether the following claim is true: your doing \( A \) would promote the satisfaction of a particular desire if and only if your not doing \( A \) would promote the frustration of that desire. And whether that claim is true depends in part on what the correct theory of promotion is—a matter that is beyond the scope of this paper.40 Even if

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40 Moreover, if McDaniel and Bradley (2008) are right about conditional desires, there are cases in which your doing \( A \) would promote the satisfaction of a desire even though your not doing \( A \) would not promote its frustration. Suppose that I want to have a beer later, on the condition that I am not tired then. If the condition of this desire isn’t met (i.e., if I am tired later), then this desire is neither satisfied nor frustrated. Suppose that I will be tired later if and only if I don’t
the two views are extensionally equivalent, however, I think that extended concordantism is better on explanatory grounds. A subjectivist who accepts disjunctivism and the standard biconditional must endorse the following explanation of why there is a reason for me to prevent my future agony: doing this would help me get something that I would come to want only if I were not to do this. This explanation is unsatisfying because it itself cries out for explanation. Why does that fact about the action give me a reason to perform it? Why isn’t it pointless, from a subjectivist perspective, for me to promote an outcome that I would come to want only if I were not to promote it? By contrast, extended concordantism offers a better explanation: there is a reason for me to prevent my future agony because if I were not to do this, I would thereby promote the frustration of a desire that I would later have. This explanation has the advantage of highlighting the connection between my failure to perform the action and my being in a condition that is bad by subjectivists’ lights: being in a scenario that frustrates a desire that I have in that very scenario. If the conjunction of extended concordantism and my formulation of subjectivism is extensionally equivalent to the conjunction of disjunctivism and the standard biconditional, then this explanation also explains the disjunctivist’s explanatory claim: I have reason to promote an outcome that I would come to want only if I were not to promote it because, were I not to do this, I would thereby promote the frustration of a desire that I would later have. I don’t want to insist on these points, however. If you think this explanatory difference between the two views is negligible, then you can take me to have proposed two equally promising solutions to the problem: extended concordantism and disjunctivism.

5. Indirectly Futurist Idealizing Views

As I argued earlier, a close analogue of the problem that I have been discussing arises for idealizing subjectivist views that are nominally presentist but that appeal to future desires in their accounts of the ways in which the agent should be idealized. Such indirectly futurist idealizing views have been defended by Sobel and Markovits, and Williams’s view could take such a form. Indeed, as I argued, it is credible that any idealizing subjectivist view that hopes to say the right thing about the Agony Argument will have to take an indirectly futurist form and will therefore confront this variant on the problem. Let me close by explaining how the foregoing discussion bears on how idealizing views of this sort should respond to the problem that they face.

drink coffee now. In that case, my drinking coffee now would promote the satisfaction of my desire. However, my not drinking coffee now would not promote its frustration: after all, if I don’t drink coffee now, I will be tired later, so my desire will be neither satisfied nor frustrated.
For the sake of specificity, I will focus on Sobel’s view. As I understand him, Sobel thinks that (i) what you have reason to do now is what you would now want your non-idealized self to do now if you had engaged in “ideal procedural deliberation,” and (ii) if you had engaged in such deliberation, you would now want your non-idealized self to promote the satisfaction of his future desires. The question that Sobel must answer is this: which of your many possible future desires are such that, if you had engaged in ideal procedural deliberation, you would now want your non-idealized self to promote their satisfaction? In other words, which of your possible future desires are such that your ideal advisor wants you to promote their satisfaction? The most natural answers are just the ones that we have been evaluating on behalf of futurist subjectivism. For example, actualism says that the future desires whose satisfaction your ideal advisor wants you to promote are the ones that you will actually have. Possibilism says that the future desires whose satisfaction your ideal advisor wants you to promote are the ones that you will have at some possible world whose past and present match those of the actual world.

It might seem that the other views that we considered are not available to Sobel. Suppose that I can either order coffee or order tea. It is natural to understand Sobel as claiming that, at any given time, there is a single set of possible future desires of mine whose satisfaction I would now want my non-idealized self to promote if I had deliberated ideally. In other words, it is natural to understand him as holding that, at any given time, I have just one ideal advisor—an advisor who selects, among all of my possible future desires, just one set of desires whose satisfaction he wants me to promote. But if we understand his view in this way, then it implies that the possible future desires of mine that can ground a reason for me to order coffee are exactly the same as the ones that can ground a reason for me to order tea. The view is unable to say what concordantism would say: that whereas the future desires that can give me a reason to order coffee are the ones that I would have if I were to order coffee, the ones that can give me a reason to order tea are the possibly different ones that I would have if I were to order tea. Since there is no bound variable in “the possible future desires of yours whose satisfaction you would now want your non-idealized self to promote if you had deliberated ideally,” the view cannot make the concordantist claim that for any action $A$ that you could now perform, the possible future desires of yours that can ground a reason for you to do $A$ are the ones that you would have if you were to do $A$.

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Sobel could avoid this problem, however, if he were to deny that at any given time, you have exactly one ideal advisor and one set of possible future desires whose satisfaction the advisor wants you to promote. Instead, he could maintain that for any action that you could perform at a given time, there is an ideal advisor and a set of possible future desires whose satisfaction the advisor wants you to promote. On this view, whether there is a reason for you to perform a particular action depends on what your ideal advisor relative to that action wants you to do—i.e., on whether, if you had deliberated ideally about performing that very action, you would want your non-idealized self to perform it. If Sobel were to develop his view in this way, he could endorse any of the other views that we considered. Concordantism would say that if you had deliberated ideally about performing a particular action, you would want your non-idealized self to promote the satisfaction of the future desires that you would have if you were to perform that very action. (It would therefore imply, when conjoined with Sobel’s theory, that whereas the possible future desires that can ground a reason for me to order coffee are the ones that I would have if I were to order coffee, the ones that can ground a reason for me to order tea are the ones that I would have if I were to order tea.) Discordantism would say that if you had deliberated ideally about performing a given action, you would want your non-idealized self to promote the satisfaction of the future desires that you would have if you were not to perform that action. Invariantism would say that if you had deliberated ideally about performing a particular action, you would want your non-idealized self to promote the satisfaction of the future desires that you would have both if you were to perform that action and if you were not to perform it. Of course, actualism and possibilism would remain available to Sobel, too.\footnote{Actualism would say that if you had deliberated ideally about performing any action, then you would want your non-idealized self to promote the satisfaction of the future desires that you will actually have. Possibilism would say that if you had deliberated ideally about performing any action, then you would want your non-idealized self to promote the satisfaction of the future desires that you have at some possible world whose past and present match those of the actual world.}

However, for the reasons that I gave earlier, none of these views would be satisfactory: each of them would either fail to answer the Agony Argument, have unacceptable implications about other cases, or both. But Sobel could endorse an analogue of extended concordantism if he were to accept the following two claims about what you would want your non-idealized self to do if you had engaged in ideal procedural deliberation about performing a particular action:
(1) If your doing $A$ at $t$ would promote the satisfaction of a desire that you would have at a time later than $t$ if you were to do $A$ at $t$, then if you had engaged in ideal procedural deliberation about whether to do $A$ at $t$, you would want your non-idealized self to do $A$ at $t$.

(2) If your not doing $A$ at $t$ would promote the frustration of a desire that you would have at a time later than $t$ if you were not to do $A$ at $t$, then if you had engaged in ideal procedural deliberation about whether to do $A$ at $t$, you would want your non-idealized self to do $A$ at $t$.

When combined with the view that you have reason to do $A$ at $t$ if and only if, had you engaged in ideal procedural deliberation about whether to do $A$ at $t$, you would want your non-idealized self to do $A$ at $t$, (2) implies that there is a reason for me to prevent my future agony, and (1) implies that there is a reason for me to try the exotic dish. Of course, (2) would also commit Sobel to saying that I have reason to go to bootcamp, and (1) would commit him to saying that I have reason to drink the magic potion. As before, I am inclined to think that these implications are acceptable on balance, but I recognize that some will disagree.

I believe that essentially the same considerations would apply to Markovits’s theory, to a version of Williams’s theory that appeals to future desires, and to any other indirectly futurist idealizing view—though it would take some effort to work out the details in each case. Among the solutions that I have considered, the best option for every such view is extended concordantism.

6. Conclusion

Presentist subjectivism is threatened by the Agony Argument: it has the counterintuitive implication that there might be no reason for me to perform an action that would prevent me from undergoing an episode of agony in the future, even if I would strongly desire not to be feeling agony during that time. It is natural to suppose that subjectivists can plausibly answer this argument by allowing future desires to generate present reasons for action—either directly, as is the case on futurist subjectivist theories, or indirectly, as is the case on indirectly futurist idealizing views. But whether this is correct, and whether subjectivist theories that appeal to future desires are as promising as they initially seem, depends on whether there is an adequate solution to a problem that arises for such theories: given
that what desires you will have in the future can depend in part on what you do now, which of your many possible future desires can ground a reason for you to do something now?

I canvassed the most natural solutions and argued that none of them is satisfactory. I then proposed a more promising solution: extended concordantism. On this view, if your performing a particular action would promote the satisfaction of a future desire that you would have if you were to perform it, then there is a reason for you to perform it. Moreover, if your not performing a particular action would promote the frustration of a future desire that you would have if you were not to perform it, then there is a reason for you to perform it. Because my failing to prevent my future agony would promote the frustration of the desire not to be in agony that I would have during the future agony, this view implies that I have a reason to prevent my future agony. It also delivers plausible verdicts about cases like that of the exotic dish, in which trying something new would give me desires whose satisfaction I would thereby promote. As I acknowledged, however, the view has counterintuitive implications about some cases, and there may be problems with it that I have not noticed. Whether it is acceptable on balance, and whether a better solution can be found, are matters that I encourage subjectivists and their opponents to investigate.\footnote{One potential problem for the view has to do with the notion that the future is metaphysically open. In (Lin 2017b), I argue that if the future is metaphysically open with respect to whether a particular event will occur (in the sense that the objective chance at present that it will occur is between 0 and 1), then it isn’t true that you are benefiting now from the future occurrence of that event. If that argument is sound, then a similar argument shows that if the future is open in the aforementioned sense with respect to whether you will acquire a particular desire if you do $A$ now, then it isn’t true that there is now a reason for you to do $A$ now on account of the fact that your doing it now would promote the satisfaction of that desire. It is not clear to me that this is a genuine problem for the view, however. For even if it isn’t true that there is a reason now for you to do $A$ now, it could be true that at the future time at which you acquire the relevant desire, $A$ will acquire the status of being an action that \textit{there is reason for you to have done now}. And this might capture enough of what we have in mind when we judge, without explicitly specifying the time at which the reason for you to do $A$ now exists, that there is a reason for you to do $A$ now. Whereas in the literature on welfare, it matters a great deal whether a future event benefits you now or will benefit you at the future time at which it occurs, it is not obvious how much it matters whether your doing $A$ now is something that \textit{there now is reason for you to do or something that there will (at the future time at which you acquire the relevant desire) be reason for you to have done}. The question of the \textit{time} at which a reason for a present action exists has not, to my knowledge, been thoroughly explored. Subjectivists who are attracted to the view that I have proposed should consider this question with an eye to determining whether arguments concerning the openness of the future threaten that view.}

\footnote{I thank Richard Yetter Chappell, Justin D’Arms, Dorothea Debus, Johan Gustafsson, Chris Heathwood, Don Hubin, Corey Katz, Barry Maguire, Tristram McPherson, Michael Ridge, Abe Roth, Wolfgang Schwarz, Stewart Shapiro, Jack Woods, Peter Zuk, the editors and reviewers at the \textit{Philosophical Review}, the participants at the inaugural Ohio Normativity workshop, and audiences at the universities of Edinburgh, Leeds, and Birmingham, the London School of Economics, and the 10th Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress.}
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