

Perspectives On "Proving" That Pleasure is "The Good"

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According to Professor Sharon Street, in her chapter "*Nothing 'Really' Matters, but That's Not What Matters*" from *Does Anything Really Matter? Essays on Parfit on Objectivity* (Oxford University Press, 2017), the attempt to prove that pleasure is *the* good rests on a mistaken metaethical assumption—namely, that normative truths must be robustly attitude-independent in order to be real or meaningful. Street argues that this demand, central to Derek Parfit's non-naturalist realism, is both conceptually confused and unnecessary for normative thought.

From Street's constructivist or Humean antirealist standpoint, evaluative truths like "pleasure is good" do not stand or fall by whether they correspond to some metaphysically independent normative realm. Rather, their truth is constituted within the context of a deliberating agent's practical standpoint. On this view, to say "pleasure is the good" is to say something from within a framework of evaluative commitments, not to assert a metaphysical fact discoverable apart from those commitments.

Thus, the question "Can you prove that pleasure is the good?" is, on her account, ill-formed. There is no external, neutral court of appeal by which such a claim could be vindicated once and for all. What we can do is examine whether valuing pleasure *survives critical scrutiny* within our web of normative attitudes—whether it is what we find, on reflection, we are most deeply committed to. If it is, then pleasure *is* the good—from that standpoint. And Street insists that this is all that normativity requires.

Importantly, Street's evolutionary debunking argument bolsters this view. If our evaluative dispositions—such as the tendency to value pleasure and avoid pain—are products of evolutionary forces, then it becomes implausible to think they are tracking mind-independent normative truths. We are not, in her analogy, consulting a "cosmic truth detector"; we are engaging in a deeply human process of constructing what matters to us. Trying to prove that pleasure is good by appeal to some robustly independent truth is epistemically circular: it assumes what it seeks to justify.

In sum, Street's chapter argues that we do not need to prove that pleasure is *objectively* the good in order for it to matter. The normative authority of pleasure emerges not from correspondence with an independent moral realm, but from its reflective endorsement within our evaluative standpoint. As she puts it, the fear that "nothing really matters" misunderstands what mattering *is*. The fact that things matter *to us*, in ways that withstand our most serious reflection, is what mattering consists in—and that is enough.