

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning  
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*VPR*, Chapters 1–3

## Chapter 2

- Humean skepticism about morality derives from skepticism about categorical imperatives more generally.
- Reasons belong to systems of rules.

There are very many other sorts of rules, and with them come other sorts of reasons. For example, there are rules of baseball, and these generate reasons of baseball. We have a good reason not to send Smoltz to the mound, namely, that another player pinch-hit for him last inning. The rules of baseball forbid sending a player to the mound to pitch when he has already been yanked for a pinch hitter in the same game. There is nothing particularly mysterious about there being such a reason. (27)

- It is often acceptable to wonder whether one ought to respect a given system of rules.

For example, the rules of good musicianship require (let's suppose) that I practice my scales daily. I might admit as much but still wonder whether I really do have any reason to practice my scales today. I might put it this way: do the rules of good musicianship really apply to me at all? Or this way: do I have any reason to follow those rules? Similarly for baseball reasons. Why on earth should I care about what the rules of baseball say? (28)

This is a search for reasons external to the system in question.

- Dreier will argue that it does not make sense to wonder whether one has a reason to follow the rules of rationality. And rationality is unique in this regard.

Maybe rationality is itself nothing more than a system of rules, just as prudence and law and morality are. Even so, I will argue that rationality, and reasons of rationality, are unlike these other systems and the reasons they generate. It always makes sense to think that there might be (or fail to be) reasons to follow moral, legal, or prudential rules. To think that there are or could be reasons to follow the rules of rationality is, I would say, to misunderstand what reasons are. Reasons are *in terms of* the rules of rationality. There is a reason to do something just in case it is rational to do it. That is why, in some contexts, there can be a need to justify morality or law or even prudence, but no similar need for a justification of rationality. (29)

- Dreier understands a categorical imperative as follows:

We are interested rather in a second sense of ‘categorical’. A rough try at expressing this sense is to say that a categorical imperative is one that each person has reason to follow, no matter what her desires. This is only a *rough* try because whether it succeeds in explaining the sense of ‘categorical’ in which Humeans deny that morality could be categorical depends on how we fill in an explanation of what it is to have a reason. (30)

- Q: Why do Humeans think moral imperatives cannot be categorical?
- A distinction: motivating reasons and normative reasons.

A motivating reason is a reason that someone has to do something, where his doing it (if he does it) is explained by his having that reason. Following Michael Smith, among others, we can contrast this sort of reason with a normative reason. A normative reason is, to put it somewhat loosely, a reason that a person *ought* to do something. If she then does it, this is explained not by the fact that she had the reason but by the fact that she recognized this reason and was motivated by it. For example, I had a normative reason to wear a suit to my brother’s wedding. And I did wear one. That I did is explained not by the fact that I had this reason but by the fact that I “accepted” it, we might say, that I cared about that sort of reason and recognized that I had it. (31)

- A Humean account (Michael Smith’s) of motivating reasons:

... we have very good grounds to say that a person has a motivating reason to  $\phi$  only when she has a desire to  $\psi$  and a belief that by  $\phi$ -ing she will  $\psi$ . For suppose that she believed that by  $\phi$ -ing she would  $\psi$ , and that this explains why she  $\phi$ s — that’s

what's necessary for her to have a motivating reason to  $\phi$ . What do we have to add? We have to add that she had some motivation to do what she believed she would do by  $\phi$ -ing. What state is that? A motivation to do what she believes she will do by  $\phi$ -ing is a motivation to  $\psi$  (since that's what she believes she'll do by  $\phi$ -ing). The state that explains this motivation is one which normally produces the motivation as its output. So it is a desire to  $\psi$ . (32)

- Dreier thinks the Humean denies that moral imperatives can be categorical because the Humean takes moral imperatives to be motivating reasons. Here, recall, Hume's *Treatise* III arguments that we examined earlier in the semester.

Humeans doubt that morality could consist of categorical imperatives, because (i) a categorical imperative is one that you have reason to follow irrespective of your desires, and (ii) what you have motivating reason to do depends on your desires. If morality cannot consist of categorical imperatives, then a person can be given reasons to follow moral rules only if she has certain relevant desires. In particular, she must desire to follow moral rules, or desire what the moral rules tell her to pursue, or the like. What desires we have is a contingent fact about us. So whether a person has any reason at all to follow moral rules is a contingent matter. (32–33)

- Dreier's approach is to challenge the claim that moral imperatives must be motivating reasons. Instead, they can be the reasons of rationality.

But it is not obvious that reasons of rationality and motivating reasons are the same thing. If they aren't, then it might be that morality can be justified to anyone, independent of her desires, because everyone has the reason of rationality to follow moral rules, even though whether a person has a motivating reason to follow moral rules is contingent. (33)

- Motivating reasons seem to be different than the reasons of rationality.

*Are* motivating reasons just the same as reasons of rationality? On the face of it, no. They do not seem to be the same *kind* of thing. Motivating reasons are psychologically real, since they are explanatory by nature. A motivating reason that you have is an empirical property that you bear, or how could it explain anything that you do? But a reason of rationality is something normative. For you to have a reason of rationality is for it to be the case that you *ought* to act in a certain way. (34)

Q: Does the typical Humean equate, even tacitly, motivating reasons and reasons of rationality?

- Dreier's formal construction of the Humean's argument:
  1. An imperative is categorical if and only if a person has reason to follow it that is independent of what she desires.
  2. A person's having reason to  $\phi$  depends on there being some  $\psi$  such that she desires to  $\psi$  and believes that by  $\phi$ -ing, she will  $\psi$ .
  3. So any reason a person might have depends on a desire of hers.
  4. So there are no categorical imperatives. (37)

And here is Dreier's critique:

This argument goes through just in case 'reason' can be understood univocally in the premises (1) and (2). Premise (2) was offered and defended as a conception of motivating, explanatory reasons (though I case some doubt on it even when construed that way). But premise (1) cannot be understood to be about motivating reasons, because if it were, then it would be perfectly obvious and trivial that there are no categorical imperatives, including moral imperatives, since it is perfectly obvious that what *motivating* reasons you have depends on your desires. (37)

Q: Are both Dreier's construction and criticism accurate?

- When someone sees that a rule informs her to  $\phi$ , but she is not motivated to  $\phi$ , that person normally lacks a desire to comply with the rule (or that system of rules, more generally).

- (M/E):

If you desire to  $\psi$  and believe that by  $\phi$ -ing you will  $\psi$ , then you have a reason to  $\phi$ . (38)

- The Tortoise Argument:

Ann suffers from this failure of practical reason: she fails to be motivated by the acknowledged means to her desired ends. So adding a desire (complying with (M/E)) does not in her bring about the motivation to perform an acknowledged means to her end of doing well in the LSAT. We cannot bring about in Ann the motivation to perform an action acknowledged by her to be a means to a certain end, by getting her to desire that end. This

is a good way to motivate normal, rational agents, but in Ann's case it is futile. But this futile attempt is exactly what we would be engaged in if we were to try to bring Ann to desire to take the LSAT prep course by giving her a desire (complying with (M/E)) that would motivate her to take the prep course. So what Ann is missing cannot be a desire. Call this the Tortoise Argument. (39)

- What reason can there be to  $\phi$  or to believe that  $q$ , respectively, for someone who does not accept (M/E) or *modus ponens*?
- Dreier claims that (M/E) is a categorical imperative. One is rationally obligated to follow the demands of (M/E), regardless of one's desires. However, no particular instance of (M/E) is categorical (including moral imperatives).

### Chapter 3

- Instrumentalism: Means-ends choices can be rationally evaluated, but the choice of ends cannot be rationally evaluated.
  - The plausibility of this claim depends upon how ends are understood. In this article, Fehige will advance a conception of ends and an associated conception of practical reasoning.

- The Hearty View of practical reasoning:

Some things are dear to our hearts. To act rationally, I submit, means in essence: to look after these things, as best we can. (49)

Also see:

A state of affairs  $p$  is dear to a person if and only if the following holds true of her: if she fully represented  $p$  to herself, she'd be pleased. (50)

- Fehige has a nonstandard conception, relative to contemporary philosophy, of desire.

Desires are, very roughly speaking and in the sense explained, pleasant thoughts. They are affects. (51)

- About those who opt for a behavioristic understanding of desire, over an affective understanding, Fehige states:

They leave us with a torso of the concept, with a behavioral persiflage of desire. Their desire is desire as instantiated in robots, or in thermostats. (53)

- This conception of desire is not hedonistic.

Furthermore, and as is illustrated by the same example, the joy we are talking about when we call desires joyful representations is not necessarily anticipated joy. To desire that  $p$ , I need not believe that  $p$  either entails or would cause pleasure for me or anybody else. Hedonism fails to ensue because there is no reason to think that if desires are pleasant thoughts they can only be thoughts *of* pleasure, in which case only pleasure could be desired. (53)

- Again, on the necessity of affect for desire:

The person who would feel indifferent to the news that he will have to die tomorrow doesn't *care* to live. His *feeling* indifferent *is* his indifference, his not caring, his not desiring. Similarly, the child who pictures herself on a new bicycle, and revels in the prospect, desires to have the bicycle. Her reveling is not a symptom or concomitant. It *is* the desire. If we take away the reveling, both the real and the counterfactual, we take away the desire. In that case, the child might still exhibit bicycle-acquiring behavior. But if so, she is, as far as that desire is concerned, a zombie. (54)

- The nature of desire must be critically examined, as it will fix the correct conception of practical reasoning.

- Against a host of alternative conceptions of desire, Fehige writes:

As we have seen, some theories of practical reason — some theories based on certain conceptions of desires — would commit you to answers like these:

Yes, for I did it intentionally.

Yes, for I had a tendency to.

Yes, for my pineal gland caused me to.

Yes, for I'm sure what caused me to was a thought.

Yes, for I did.

Yes, for it was wise to.

The answers are bizarre. This one is not: "Yes, for I had set my heart on it." (56)

- Fehige claims that normative reasons for action needn't be cause actions. (Though, he claims that they frequently do.)

- One's welfare includes one's pleasure and desire fulfillment. But since we all desire pleasure, welfare reduces simply to desire fulfillment.

- This conception of welfare can generate theories of practical reasoning.

Rationality has to do with the good life. Most of us would agree that the person who believes an action to be best for him, but doesn't perform it, is irrational — stupid, as laymen tend to put it. In other words, it is rational for him to do what he believes is best for him. As we have just argued, “best for him” means “best fulfills his desires”. Thus, it is rational for him to do what he believes would best fulfill his desires. (59–60)

- Desires can change. But, for simplicity, Fehige will pretend that we should take into account past, future, and asynchronic desires. Our desires should also be revised by the guide of desire fulfillment. But, it is not reasonable to keep changing your desires. Adapting Epictetus's suggestion, Fehige thinks that it is wise to modify both the will and the world.

- Fehige claims that no individual pleasure is inherently irrational.

Well-known examples include the intrinsic desires to count blades of grass, to have a saucer of mud, or to drink paint. To be sure, here our advice that the agent decide with a view to *all* her desires acquires a certain urgency. She may well have strong desires to survive, or not to be stared at. Still, if the fulfillment of no other desires were at stake, and if the agent had really set her heart, full representation and all, on one of these puzzling activities, then it would be only fitting for her to go ahead. It is just as rational for some people to act on desires that amaze me as it is for me to act on desires that no doubt amaze them. (66)

- Revisionism:

When you fully represent things to yourself, what can this effect? Some, whom we can call the *revisionists*, have it that full representation or some such process can change your desires, and, let us assume, rationally so. For example, you have a desire, fully represent, and end up with another desire, acquired and required by reason. (67–68)

- Fehige's nonrevisionist, moderate instrumentalist conclusion:

Desires, we said there and it is hardly controversial to say, have a content. Now, if we permitted ourselves to say that simply *grasping* the content could change a desire, then in what sense

can it ever have been a desire *with that content*? In what sense does somebody desire  $p$  ( $p$ , and not nothing or something else) who, if only he looked at  $p$  a little harder, would desire it “no longer”? What on earth did his desiring of *it* ever consist in? Here revisionists have a lot of explaining to do. While waiting for them to do the explaining, we had better remain nonrevisionists. And moderate instrumentalists. (69)