

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning
Prof. Funkhouser
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SP, Chapters 1–4

Preface

- Schroeder characterizes the Humean theory of reasons, which he aims to defend.

It is a defense of the view that all reasons for action are ultimately explained by desires. It is the view, not that Reason is beholden to the passions, but that *reasons* are. (v)

Chapter 1

- The Ronnie and Bradley example illustrates that clearly some reasons depend on psychological preferences.

Moreover, it's not hard to see *why* Ronnie's and Bradley's reasons differ, at least at a first pass — this is something to do with their respective psychologies. It is because of what they *like*, *care* about, or *want*. Ronnie likes to dance, but Bradley does not; he likes to stay away from where there is dancing going on. (1)

Q: But are *all* reasons dependent on psychological preferences? The Humean tradition, to which Schroeder belongs, answers “yes”.

- Hypotheticalism:

In this and following chapters I will lay out, explain, and defend a *version* of the Humean Theory of Reasons that I call *Hypotheticalism*, adopting Kant's term for an imperative which, like Ronnie's reason, is contingent on an agent's psychology. (5)

- The Classical Argument for the Humean Theory of Reasons:

The Classical Argument for the Humean theory has two premises. First, *Existence Internalism about Reasons*, which says that if

there is a reason for someone to do something, then it must be possible to motivate her to do it for that reason. And second, the *Humean Theory of Motivation*, which says that motivation requires a desire. If having a reason requires motivation, and motivation requires a desire, then having a reason requires having a desire. (7)

◦ Schroeder stresses that this is just one form that an argument for the Humean Theory of Reasons can take. For, he claims that the Humean about reasons needn't hold that desire is the only psychological state that can motivate. In fact, Schroeder doesn't think that this is a very good argument for the Humean Theory of Reasons.

• Why should anyone care about the Humean Theory of Reasons? The main reason is that many want there to be objective reasons (i.e., reasons that aren't dependent on one's psychology) for moral action.

• On p. 9, Schroeder stipulates a broad use of the term 'desire'.

• Q: What are reasons?

◦ In one sense, the explanatory sense, reasons are facts that figure in explanations.

◦ Another sense of reason is normative: it is a consideration that counts in favor of something. This kind of normativity comes in two varieties: the objective normative and the subjective normative.

◦ These different senses can be combined to provide us with the concept of a motivating reason. Motivating reasons are subjective normative reasons that also constitute explanatory reasons.

◦ Subjective reasons can be reduced to objective reasons. The Humean Theory of Reasons is a claim about objective normative reasons.

Chapter 2

• The *No Background Conditions* view: Desires explain reasons by partially constituting them (rather than merely being necessary conditions for reasons).

The No Background Conditions view is an interesting theory. It tells us something informative about the *way* in which Ronnie's desire explains his reason. It explains it, on this view, simply by the fact that he has this desire being *part* of his reason. (24)

- The *Deliberative Constraint*:

That assumption is that when Ryan is reasoning well, the kinds of thing about which he should be thinking are his reasons. Call this the *Deliberative Constraint*. (26)

- Here is Nagel's version, in his quest for *pure* altruism, of the *Objectionably Self-Regarding Objection*:

Nagel assumes that there are No Background Conditions on reasons, and accepts the Deliberative Constraint. From the No Background Conditions assumption it follows that if the Humean Theory of Reasons is correct, then Ryan must get mentioned as part of his reason. But from the Deliberative Constraint, it then follows that Ryan must think about his own desires in deliberating about whether to help Katie. On such a view, practical reasoning really does turn out to be objectionably self-regarding. It is *objectionable* to think that when Ryan is thinking about whether to help Katie, his reasoning is somehow flawed or even enthymematic, if he does not take a moment to reflect on whether he wants Katie to have what she needs. Such a view commits agents who are deliberating well and non-enthymematically to taking what Mark Johnston calls the *pornographic attitude*: they are moved only by considerations about the satisfaction of their own desires — even when these desires happen to be other-directed. This is why Nagel hopes for the possibility of altruism in a much stronger sense — not reasons to act which derive from purely altruistic motives, but reasons to act which don't derive from motives at all. He holds that this is the only way in which one's reasoning can avoid being self-regarding. (26–27)

Recall that the Humean can allow for altruistic desires.

- Schroeder claims that even someone who acts in their own self-interest, but only after inquiring after his own desires, is guilty of acting with *objectionable* self-regard.

But even Ronnie is acting in a manner that is objectionably self-regarding if the thought that there will be dancing at the party doesn't move him to go there, until he remembers that he desires to dance. If Ronnie genuinely desires to dance, then *all it should take* for him to be moved to go to the party is the thought that there will be dancing there. (27)

- Lesson: Either the Deliberative Constraint or No Background Conditions must go.

- Schroeder claims that reasons typically are not self-regarding.

On this view, Ronnie has the desire that he go dancing. It is because there is dancing at the party that Ronnie's going there will allow him to dance. So the fact that there will be dancing at the party is a reason for Ronnie to go there. This fact is Ronnie's reason to go to the party, and Ronnie does not get mentioned as part of this fact — he is mentioned only as part of the explanation of why this fact satisfies the necessary conditions in order to be a reason for Ronnie. (30)

- Is the following claim really true?

The No Background Conditions view rejects, in the case of reasons, a distinction that we can easily make in the case of presidents and pieces of corn on the cob. (34)

But just because they hold that one necessary condition for having a reason isn't a background condition, they are not thereby committed to there being *no* background conditions for reasons or that they are *oblivious* to the distinction in this case.

- Is Schroeder making any mistake in this passage?

Yet it is possible for there to be an objective normative reason for someone to do something, even though she ought not to do it. Suppose, for example, that Ronnie ought not to go to the party. It may be, for example, that it is his wife's birthday, and she has made dinner reservations for them during the party. It doesn't follow that there is no reason for him to go to the party, just that it is outweighed by the reasons for him to have dinner with his wife instead. So the natural view equating 4 with 5 can't be correct. (35–36)

- The *Wrong Place Objection*:

So if Katie needs help, and there is a reason for Ryan to help her, this must be in virtue of, or *because* of, some desire of Ryan's. The Wrong Place objection says that it doesn't matter whether or not we grant that Ryan has such a desire. Even if he does, this is simply the wrong answer to the question, '*Why* is there a reason for Ryan to help Katie?' (38)

Chapter 3

- Summary of the background conditions debate up till now:

According to the No Background Conditions view, when we say that there is a reason for Ronnie to go to the party because Ronnie desires to dance, what follows the ‘because’ tells us not just what explains *why* there is such a reason, but tells us part of what that reason is. If we reject that view, then the fact that Ronnie desires to dance must be able to explain how something else — the fact that there will be dancing at the party — is a reason for Ronnie to go there. (41)

- The Standard Model for normative explanations:

The explanation that there is a reason for X to do A because of P follows the *Standard Model* just in case it works because there is (1) some further action b such that there is a reason for X to do b and (2) not just because of P and (3) P explains why doing A is a *way* for X to do b . (43)

- The Standard Model Theory, according to which all normative reasons fit this model, is problematic for the Humean Theory of Reasons: the Incoherence and Chauvinism objections.

- The Incoherence objection:

But consider the reason for Ronnie to pursue his desires, which according to the Standard Model is needed in order for the explanations of reason by desire to *work*. Can this reason be explained by a desire? For it to be explained by a desire in the *same way*, it would have to be explained by itself. And that would surely be circular. No reason can explain itself. It can’t be because there is a reason for Ronnie to pursue his desires that there is a reason for Ronnie to pursue his desires. Since it *can’t* be explained in this way, it follows from the Standard Model Theory that the Humean Theory of Reasons is committed both to saying that this reason *can* be explained by a desire, and that it *cannot*. (46)

- Q: Does the Humean about reasons think that we are required to take the means to our ends?

Rephrasing from talk about requirements to talk about reasons, the dispute is not about whether there is a basic agent-neutral reason for everyone to pursue one’s desires — by the Standard Model Theory, even the Humean has to accept such a reason, and allow that it is not itself explained by a desire. According to Korsgaard, then, the dispute between Humeans and non-Humeans is simply about how *many* agent-neutral reasons there are which don’t have to be explained by a desire. The Humean says one, and non-Humeans say more than one. (48)

- The Chauvinism objection:

If this is the real issue about Humeanism, then in a natural sense, Humeans are really merely being *Chauvinist* when they are confronted with cases of intuitive reasons that they can't manage to explain by appeal to a desire. For example, suppose that it turns out that no desire of Ryan's can explain why there is a reason for him to help Katie. The Humean has to accept the result that there is no reason for Ryan to help Katie. But a non-Humean will say: why can't there be *two* reasons that are unexplained by desires? One to pursue one's desires, and another to help people in need of help? Whatever could be wrong with that? (48–49)

- Schroeder thinks that the Incoherence and Chauvinism objections are good. As such, he rejects the Standard Model.

- Schroeder has presented 4 objections to the Humean Theory of Reasons: Objectionably Self-Regarding, Wrong Place, Incoherence, and Chauvinism. But he has argued that these objections are effective only on the further assumption of No Background Conditions or Standard Model. Schroeder will then advance a Humean Theory of Reasons — Hypotheticalism — that rejects these 2 assumptions.

Chapter 4

- Schroeder's reductive project is to provide a *constitutive explanation* of reasons in terms of desires. One might be skeptical of such a project, as it seems to be an attempt to reduce the normative to the non-normative.

- Schroeder's view of "interesting" reductions:

I want reductive views to be able to underwrite constitutive explanations, such as that of why our three-sided figure is a triangle. And I think that in order to do so, they must be views in metaphysics, not merely views about how we use our words or how we find out about things. Both of these remain true if we understand reductive views as offering *analyses* of properties. As such, they are asymmetric — the reduction of *triangular* reduces it to *having*, *three*, and *sides*, by analyzing it in terms of them. But *having* does not get analyzed in terms of *triangular*, and neither do *three* or *sides*. Moreover, on this approach reductive views *do* tell us something about *triangularity*, and not merely about what words we can use to ascribe it to something. It tells us about its *structure*. (66)

But this view demands that properties have structure. How are we to make sense of this notion?

- Properties are commonalities. An example of a structured property: *shaded square*.
- Skepticism about reducing the normative often originates with Moore's Open Question Argument. But, Schroeder claims that the Open Question Argument is about *meaning*, and it does not apply to Schroeder's project of *metaphysical* reduction.
- Schroeder identifies two common features of objections to the project of reducing the normative. First:

...most interesting objections to reductive normative theories amount to versions of this idea. They pose some feature that normative properties are supposed to have, and argue that no reductive account could possibly explain that feature. (76)

Second: the problem of *propagating implications*.