

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning
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SP, Chapters 5–7

Chapter 5

- Objection: The Humean Theory of Reasons counts non-reasons as reasons.
Example: Aunt Margaret and Mars. (84)

- The Humean can impose some restrictions on the original view, while sticking to its spirit.

In order to deal with the Too Many Reasons objection, most Humeans adopt *restrictions* on their Humeanism. They say, for example, that not just any desire is sufficient for the presence of reasons, but only desires that would survive *cognitive psychotherapy* or persist in *reflective equilibrium*. Or they say that it is what we *desire to desire* that matters, or what we *value*, or what our *life projects* are. (84–85)

- Does this sound right?

For surely it is at least *possible* that Aunt Margaret's desire *would* survive in reflective equilibrium, and really is her central life project. It is true that assuming this to be the case tends to mitigate the unintuitiveness of saying that she has a reason to build her spacecraft. But it does not eliminate it entirely, and pretending otherwise does the Humean theory a disservice. It is very natural to think that there is still no reason for Aunt Margaret to build her spacecraft. (86)

Is Schroeder giving this objection too much credibility?

- Look back to the original statement of the Humean Theory of Reasons, and ask yourself if this is correct.

I take it that any version of the Humean Theory of Reasons is going to endorse some reading of this conditional:

1 If doing *A* promotes what Ronnie desires, then there is a reason for Ronnie to do *A*. (88)

◦ Some object that this proposal is plausible only if desire is here understood in a normative sense. But then desire is analyzed in terms of reasons, which thwarts the project of analyzing reasons in terms of desires.

◦ Some might think that **1** depends on **2**.

2 There is a reason for Ronnie to *either* do what promotes each of his desires or not have those desires. (90)

But this would be a reason that is not grounded in desire, contrary to the Humean position.

• Schroeder argues that our intuitions that there is no reason (i.e., a negative existential) for some action are generally unreliable. He makes a comparison to epistemic reasons and considers some counterfactual situations to support this case. So, Schroeder is willing to accept that Humeanism does generate these (supposedly objectionable) reasons.

• It seems that Humeans should accept *Proportionalism* — the thesis that the strength of a reason for action is proportional to the strength of the desire that underlies it, as well as how well the action would satisfy this desire. Proportionalism has practical consequences:

Adding Proportionalism to the Humean Theory of Reasons yields the thesis that you always ought to do that action which best promotes your desires on balance. For what you ought to do is a matter of the weights of yours reasons in favor of each option.
(98)

But Schroeder denies Proportionalism. So, Schroeder will eventually owe us an account of the weight of reasons.

Chapter 6

• Objection: The Humean Theory of Reasons does not count some things as reasons that are reasons. Example: A father has a reason to support his daughter, even if he has no desire to whatsoever. Many of these supposed reasons are moral, agent-neutral reasons.

◦ Schroeder thinks that the Humean needs to account for 4 features of agent-neutral reasons: the agent-neutrality of ascription, universality, weak modal status, and strong modal status. It is only the last feature that he thinks is

particularly difficult.

- The strong modal status claim:

... there is the fact that it seems that for any desire, an agent would have a reason to help Katie even if he did not have that desire. (106)

This seems to be something the Humean cannot accept. But, Schroeder argues otherwise.

The Humean Theory of Reasons only says that every time someone has a reason, she must have some desire that explains why. It does not say that for every reason, there must be some single desire that explains why each person who has that reason has it. (108)

But, does Schroeder's response address the above statement of the strong modal status claim?

- Schroeder suggests that agent-neutral reasons are massively overdetermined by desires (and hence not dependent on any particular desire).
- Schroeder first enters into a discussion of the *promotion* relation. At issue here is the relationship (identity, necessary means, etc.) that an action must bear to the object of a desire in order to count as promoting it. Schroeder opts for a weak reading of this relationship.

X 's doing A promotes p just in case it increases the likelihood of p relative to some baseline [the status quo]. (113)

- Schroeder explains how the holism of the mental can explain how any desire can generate certain reasons (e.g., to believe something only if it is true). But, Schroeder does not show us how this works with respect to moral reasons.

But I am not going to offer such explanations of particular moral reasons here. There is no particular such explanation that I happen to favor, and this broad-brush defense of Hypotheticalism is in any case not the place to become bogged down in the details of such an explanation. (115)

But does he owe us more here?

- If moral reasons are generally overdetermined, then we should expect many reasons as to why one should be moral.

- Schroeder thinks that Hypotheticalism is compatible with a spectrum of views about agent-neutrality, which he labels Kantian, Aristotelian, and Humean. The Kantian holds that there are reasons binding on any possible agent, the Aristotelian holds that there are reasons binding on all human agents, and the Humean holds that there are reasons binding on most of us.
- A summary of Schroeder’s position:

The Hypotheticalist account of agent-neutral reasons is as follows: there are some actions that promote any possible desire. So the reasons to perform these actions are reasons for anyone, no matter what she desires. But they are, nevertheless, explained by desires.
(121)

Chapter 7

- In this chapter Schroeder offers an account of the weight of reasons, which is an alternative to Proportionalism.
- Schroeder allows for the possibility of reasons with incomparable weights. Nevertheless, reasons can often “add up”.
- Schroeder denies that individual reasons have weights. Rather, sets of reasons have weight.
- So, how does Schroeder understand the “weightier-than” relation? Here are 5 points:
 1. “...one reason is not weightier than another because it carries more weight in deliberation, but because it is *correct* for it to carry more weight in deliberation.” (129)
 2. “First there are reasons, which weigh in favor of and against a given action. Then, if the reasons on one side outweigh those on the other, that is what the agent out to do.” (131)
 3. “...what an agent ought to do would also be the result of correct deliberation from full information.” (131)
 4. “And the natural idea that was my positive suggestion, was that partial undercutting defeaters are reasons to place less weight on the reason that they undercut. It follows from these two ideas that the weight of a reason depends on the existence or not of reasons to place less weight on it.” (133)

5. “The right kind of reasons to do A are reasons that are shared by everyone engaged in the activity of doing A , such that the fact that they are engaged in doing A is sufficient to explain why these are reasons for them.” (135)

- But a problem emerges:

The foregoing ideas are, I think, highly attractive, and they fit together in a very natural way. But unfortunately, I think, they cannot all be right. For if the Attractive Idea is our analysis of the weight of reasons, then the weightier-than relation is analyzed in terms of correctness. But if Correct is our analysis of correctness, then correctness is analyzed in terms of the weightier-than relation. But that looks like a circle, and circular analyses should be objectionable . . . (136)

- Responses:

The weight of reasons *does* depend on the weight of reasons to place less weight on them, and their weight depends on the existence of reasons to place less weight on them, and so on. I think it should be uncontroversial that this happens — it is the important phenomenon of undercutting defeat.

The reason that this does not make us worry that an explanatory regress threatens, is that we think that undercutters *eventually run out*. At some point there is an undercutter that is not undercut . . . (137)

- Schroeder applies this account to the Ryan and Margaret cases. Consider, for example, whether what Schroeder says about Ryan is plausible:

So where might agent-neutral reasons to place more weight on Ryan’s reason to help Katie come from? I think it is easy to see. Consider, for example, the fact that it is an agent-neutral reason to help Katie. Is this fact an agent-neutral reason to place weight on it in deliberation? Well, for any agent X , this fact helps to explain why helping Katie is a way of doing something that there is a reason for X to do. And since placing weight on this reason promotes actually helping Katie, it helps to explain why placing weight on this reason promotes doing something that there is a reason for X to do. And according to Hypotheticalism, doing something that there is a reason for X to do *has* to promote the object of at least one of X ’s desires. So it follows that for any agent X , the fact that the reason to help Katie is agent-neutral helps to explain why X ’s placing weight on this reason promotes

the object of one of X 's desires. So by Hypotheticalism and Agent-Neutral, there is an agent-neutral reason to place weight on it. (142–143)