

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning
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RWR, Introduction and Part 1

Introduction

- This is a book about how one should live, all things considered (note: not just moral considerations), with the following assumption in place:

This is a book about how one should live. And since I take it for granted that what one should do, all things considered, is what there is most reason to do, it is at the same time a book about practical reason. (1)

The answer is that one should (in the practical reasoning sense of ‘should’) live as the ethically virtuous person would live.

◦ Setiya denies the explanatory order accepted by some: one cannot understand practical reason without first understanding ethical virtue. For one, he contrasts his view with the Instrumentalism of (or inspired by) Hobbes and Hume.

- Q: Why be moral?

The answer to the question “Why should I be moral?” is not, on this account, supplied by further *reasons* to be moral, which are certified as reasons by a standard other than ethical virtue. It is supplied by the fact that having the moral virtues is a matter of being responsive to considerations that *therefore* count as reasons to act. (3)

- Setiya employs a liberal concept of deliberation:

I want to count as “practical thought” or “practical reasoning” — terms I use interchangeably — not only deliberation as an intentional action, but the motivation of action done for reasons (though perhaps without deliberation, in the strict sense), the balancing of reasons (even when it is not conscious) , and the forming and revising of intentions and desires. (7–8)

- Does this sound right?

I want to count *acting* for a reason as a central instance of practical thought. After all, it is relevant to one's degree of responsiveness to reason whether one merely forms the intention to act, about which one is then weak-willed, or whether one actually tries to do something about it. (8)

- Setiya will present, and argue for, a non-reductive virtue theory of practical reasoning.

The Virtue Theory: Being good as a disposition of practical thought is being a disposition of practical thought that is good as a trait of character. (8)

- Problem: Those with defective characters sometimes should not act (i.e., do not have reason to act) as the virtuous person would act. Example: the squash game.

- Setiya thinks this is a problem for any imitative theory of practical reasoning. And, he offers a revised formulation that, he thinks, is immune to this problem.

Reasons: The fact that p is a reason for A to ϕ just in case A has a collection of psychological states, C, such that the disposition to be moved to ϕ by C-and-the-belief-that- p is a good disposition of practical thought, and C contains no false beliefs.

... The doctrine of *Reasons* is immune to the problem of imitation because it does not connect the assessment of practical thought with the case in which *all* of one's dispositions are good. (12–13)

Reasons is not specific to virtue ethic accounts of practical reasoning. To get to a virtue ethic account, one must argue that the good dispositions of practical thought are those that are good as a trait of character.

- Like Anscombe, Setiya believes that a good understanding of practical reasoning requires an understanding of what it is to act intentionally (or for a reason).

- Setiya distances himself, however, from the ethical rationalists.

According to the rationalist, in this sense of the term, the standards of practical reason can be derived, at least in outline, from the nature of agency or practical thought. The philosophy of action is thus the foundation of ethics. (14–15)

Setiya thinks that virtue theory is the only viable alternative to ethical rationalism.

- In Part 1 Setiya argues against the claim that when we act intentionally it is always “under the guise of the good”. Instead, Setiya believes that one can act for a reason without seeing it as a good reason. His position sounds even more radical than that:

To clarify: it is not just that one need not see the consideration as *sufficient* reason; one need not see it as doing anything at all to justify what one does. (17)

- An interesting inspiration from Hume:

What I take from him is an idea that lies behind the treatment of reason and passion in the *Treatise*: we know what we mean by “theoretical reason” or “reason, in a strict and philosophical sense” (3.1.1.12); but we have no clear conception of a “practical reason” that corresponds to this. We do not know what practical reason *is*, if it is meant to provide a standard for thought and action, apart from the standards of virtue and vice. (19)

Part 1

- Setiya will attack the claim that reasons for action are always under the guise of the good.
- Acting for a reason is sufficient for acting intentionally, but Setiya denies that it is also necessary for intentional action.
- A version of Anscombe’s “knowledge without observation” claim:

Belief: When someone is acting intentionally, there must be something he is doing intentionally, not merely trying to do, in the belief that he is doing it. (26)

Q: But *why* is there this connection between belief and acting for a reason?

- Some think that to act for a reason just is to have your action caused, in the right way, by psychological states (e.g., a belief-desire pair).

That being so, the best way to think about the belief-desire model of acting for reasons is not as the claim that our reasons for acting are really beliefs and desires, but as an attempt to say what it is to act for a reason (where the reason is a putative fact) in causal-psychological terms. It is, in effect, a reductive metaphysical account of “acting because *p*” or “acting for the reason that *p*” — not a rejection of that common-sense idiom. (30)

◦ Velleman presents some cases, though, in which it seems that behavior is motivated by belief-desire pairs (in the right way), but nevertheless the person is not acting for reasons. Does the analysis of the case seem correct?

Although it would be right to say that Freud knocked the inkstand with his arm out of a desire to break it, it would be wrong to say that he did so *in order to* break it, or on the *ground* that doing so would break it. There seem to be two levels of explanation here: one of mere psychological motivation, which does apply to Freud, and one of acting on the basis of a reason, which does not. (34)

◦ Some claim that what is missing from these simple causal-motivational accounts is that the agent needs to *see* these as good reasons. But, Setiya offers counter-examples to this necessity claim: the man estranged from his sexual inclinations, the cruel philosopher, and the guy who turns on radios. (36–38) These people supposedly act for reasons; they simply do not see these as good reasons.

• A further problem with “guise of the good” proposals, according to Setiya, is that they do not account for *Belief*. And *Belief* is core to a correct account of what it is to take something as a reason.

◦ This “taking” is both belief-like and desire-like:

Like belief, it represents its content as being true — after all, I know what my reasons are. And like desire, it has the power to cause or motivate the action it depicts, and to cause it to be done for the reason in question. (40)

• Setiya claims that when we take something as a reason we do so in the explanatory, not the justificatory, sense of ‘reason’. And, he offers an account that explains *Belief*.

When I go for my walk because the weather is fine, I am motivated by a state that is at once the belief that I am walking outside for that reason, and like a desire in causing me to do it (and to do it for that reason).

Whatever its difficulties, this interpretation of taking-as-one’s-reason would help to explain *Belief*. If I believe that I am doing ϕ for the reason that p , it follows trivially that I believe that I am doing ϕ . (42)

• Acting for a reason involves a second-order belief.

In the overwhelmingly typical case, when I act because p , I *rightly* believe that I believe that p , and that this belief is part of what is motivating me to act. (44)

- So, Setiya offers the following refinement of the simple psychological theory.

To take p as one's reason for doing ϕ is to have the desire-like belief that one is *hereby* doing ϕ because of the belief that p . (46)

- These desire-like beliefs are intentions. But, Michael Smith argued against the possibility of psychological states that are both belief-like and desire-like. But, Setiya denies the account desire on which Smith's argument depends. (49)

- Setiya is offering a causal account of intentional action. Here it goes:

In acting intentionally, one is moved to act by an intention that explains what one is doing. Being moved to act is, *inter alia*, being *caused* to act. To that extent, this counts as a causal theory of action. It differs from other causal theories, however, in that it is concerned with the causal process that accompanies action, not with what precedes it. The causal constraint on acting intentionally does not concern the *origin* of one's action, but its being caused by one's intention (and in accordance with the content of that intention) as it goes on. (57)

- Keep in mind the prominent role that *Belief* plays in Setiya's argument. It is used, among other things, to argue against "guise of the good" theories.

Taking something as one's reason cannot simply be a matter of taking it as a *good* reason to act. That would make a mystery of *Belief*. Instead, it is a matter of taking something as a reason that *explains* one's action. (60)

- But how is an intentional action made *intelligible*, unless it was viewed as a good? Joseph Raz argues like this. (62)

- Setiya responds that not every action seen as a good is thereby made intelligible, nor is an appeal to a perceived good necessary to make an action intelligible. For the former:

For the first point, imagine someone who is relentlessly and indiscriminately rude. He seems to have no sense whatsoever of the effect of his brusque approach on others, and when he is aware of it, he could not care less. If he one day decides to tone down his complaints in order to spare my feelings, because he believes that he should do so, I am liable to find his action unintelligible, even though it is done for a reason he sees, suddenly and inexplicably, under the guise of the good. His behavior makes no sense. (63)

For the latter:

In the ordinary sense of the word, it is perfectly *intelligible* when people hit inanimate objects in anger, jump up and down in excitement, or tear their clothes in grief, even if they are not acting for reasons at all. This is intelligible not just in being something we might predict, but because we can understand it “from the inside.” (63)

- Setiya’s final say on intelligibility:

Explanation by reasons makes action intelligible only in the trivial sense of *explaining* it; the explanation need not be edifying, or justifying, and it need not take place, in any sense, “under the guise of the good.” (66)