

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning
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4/21/09
RWR, Part 2 and Conclusion

- Recall the strategy: Argue for the virtue theory of practical reasoning by arguing that the only possible alternative, ethical rationalism, is false.
- Dispositions of practical thought contribute to one's virtue and our judgments of their character. One's character is also partially constituted by one's emotional dispositions. Of course, one's character is also partially constituted by one's actions.

Possession of a virtue, like prudence or sympathy, depends on these, not because each virtue is defined by a single list of dispositions, but because it is a matter of having dispositions that count as good character in a given sphere. Thus one may be prudent partly in virtue of one's disposition to recognize and think about the long-term consequences of one's actions, or sympathetic in part because one feels distress at the suffering of others. (75)

- There might be incomparable dispositions of practical thought, in which case it is indeterminate what one should do. (78)
- Like Geach, Setiya denies that it makes sense to speak of something as being good *simpliciter*. Things are good only relative to some kind or way. Good is *attributive*.

When I say that *good* is *attributive*, I mean three things: first, that for some kinds, at least, things can be evaluated *as* members of that kind; second, that being a good *F* (or good *as* an *F*) is not just a matter of being an *F* and being *good*; third, that the *standards* for being a good *F* may differ from the standards for being a good *G*, even when *F*s are a kind of *G*. We can illustrate the last two points with a familiar example: being a good theft is not a matter of being a theft and being good; and the standards for being a good theft are not the standards for being a good act, even though theft is a kind of act. (80)

◦ The goodness of a kind K cannot, in general, be deduced from the mere concept of K . Nevertheless, Setiya, following Kit Fine, claims that the goodness of a thing is determined by the nature of that thing. This metaphysical point sets up an argument for the virtue theory of practical reasoning.

It is a consequence of the Difference Principle, together with the fact that dispositions of practical thought are traits of character, that if the virtue theory is false — if being a good disposition of practical thought is not simply a matter of being a disposition of practical thought that is a good trait of character — there must be something about the nature of practical thought to explain or illuminate its failure. Dispositions of practical thought must be distinctive, as traits of character, in a way that explains why they are subject to their own evaluative standard. If there is nothing in the nature of practical thought to indicate this standard, something distinct from the standard of good character, the virtue theory must be true. (84–85)

One could oppose Setiya by arguing that action has an end, and a standard of goodness, determined by the nature of action.

- Against recognitional views of practical reasoning:

The problem is much the same for other versions of the recognitional view, like those which appeal to beliefs about happiness or the human good. Beliefs of this kind are *sometimes* involved in practical thought. But if it is wrong to say that we act under the guise of the good, in the sense explored in Part One, it is even more implausible to say that we act “under the guise of happiness”: that we aim at happiness or the human good in everything we do. The sufficient conditions of acting for a reason, or being moved by one, do not depend on evaluative beliefs of any kind. (89)

- Constructivism is an alternative to recognitional rationalism.

For the constructivist, the standards of practical reason can be derived from an account of practical thought that does not rely on its being sensitive to evaluative facts. It appeals instead to formal features of the concepts it deploys, to the role of rational dispositions or desire in motivation, or to the fact that, in acting for reasons, we know what we are doing and why. (89)

- Many assume that the only options are recognitional views, constructivism, or skepticism about practical reasoning. But Setiya argues that this is a false

trilemma.

- Setiya argues against Kantian constructivism.

Whatever is involved in taking oneself to have good reason for what one does — a commitment to will one's maxim as a universal law, or to treat humanity as an end — one need not do so in order to act for reasons, or to engage in practical thought. (92)

- But it seems that there are versions of constructivism that do not depend on the guise of the good.

The claim is that the standards of practical thought correspond to dispositions that make up the capacity to engage in it. It is left completely open by the structure of this view just what these dispositions are: the tendency to will one's maxim as a universal law; to satisfy one's desires; to reflect on one's motives. Different proposals about the content of rational agency amount to different versions of constructivism, which need not have anything to do with Kant. Nor do they depend on the claim that practical thought is *about* what there is reason to do, or that, in acting for reasons, we take ourselves to have good reasons to act. On the face of it, at least, this is constructivism without the guise of the good. (95)

- Instrumentalism is one such version. Instrumentalism is often supported by a belief in the Humean Theory of Motivation. But, against this thesis, Setiya argues that belief alone can motivate desire (which can then motivate action, in conjunction with belief).

It is clear that my desire to help you out is a product of practical thought, in the unambitious sense I have employed throughout this book. So it had better be explained by a disposition of practical thought. But the only disposition required is the disposition to form a new desire because I believe that you need help. It follows that this disposition, even if it counts as a desire, must be a disposition of practical thought. Hence, a disposition of practical thought that generates a new desire need *not* be triggered, even in part, by a prior desire. (106)

- Intentional action provides us with self-knowledge of the beliefs that guide the action. But Setiya denies David Velleman's suggestion that standards of practical reasoning can be derived from this fact.

Insofar as acting on one's intention is a matter of making true its explanatory content, and thus gaining self-knowledge, it achieves

this aim equally and perfectly well regardless of the nature of the explanation. Success in action, in the sense defined by its constitutive aim, *is* simply a matter of doing what one intends. (112)

- Conclusion:

We have no grip on what it is to think well about how to live and how to act, apart from our grip on what it is for a person to be good. (116)