

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning
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Summary

- We began the semester by reading Hume to discover his positions, and the arguments he provided to support them, with respect to motivation and practical reasoning. After reading some background about his philosophy of mind and epistemology, we considered the following arguments:

1. The *Eliminating the Possibilities Argument* for the conclusion that reason cannot motivate action.
2. The *Impulse Argument* for the conclusion that reason cannot oppose a passion.
3. The *Representation Argument* for the conclusion that reason cannot oppose a passion.

In these ways, Hume claimed that reason is the slave of the passions. We also examined the qualified senses in which Hume tolerates the claim that a passion can be unreasonable.

Hume then applied this philosophy of action and practical reasoning to morality. The Humean Theory of Motivation is used as critical premise in advancing the *Motivation Argument*, which concludes that moral judgments are not the conclusions of reasoning. Instead, moral judgments are feelings of pleasure or pain. In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Appendix 1) Hume presents 5 arguments for the conclusion that moral judgments are not derived from reason.

- In his paper “Choosing Ends”, Schmidtz introduced us to the concept of a *maieutic end* — an end “achieved through a process of coming to have other ends.” This type of end is supposed to be distinct from the 3 more widely recognized ends: final, instrumental, and constitutive. One could challenge whether there are such distinct ends, or the claim that we rationally deliberate about them.

Kolnai also argued for deliberation about ends. He argued that much of what is described as deliberation about means is not actually deliberation at all. But, one could challenge whether his so-called deliberation about ends isn't just means-ends deliberation.

- Millgram argued against Instrumentalism by arguing that our novel experiences provide us with opportunities to learn about what matters. This learning is practical induction, which is supposed to be an instance of reasoning about ends. Central to his argument is the belief that desires come with backward-looking commitments. For this reason, he claimed that it is impossible to desire at pill (or will), as recognition of the fact that the backward-looking commitments have not been met will extinguish the forward-looking commitments (and, thereby, the desire itself).

He also argued that the practical induction is necessary to achieve unity of agency. Practical judgments are defeasible and it must be psychologically realistic that following them will lead to good outcomes. For this reason, a Super-Talmud that did not rely on practical induction would not help one achieve unity of agency. Nor can innate interests/desires provide us with enough guidance to live a coherent life. Practical induction must serve as a supplement. (Q: But, why think these are inductions? And if so, why think that they are practical?)

Millgram also advanced the view that pleasure is merely a reliable indicator of what is desirable, and that the pleasure is often not the desired end. We can also learn about value through testimony. In particular, we can trust the practical judgments of our friends and treat their mental states (e.g., desires) as premises in our own practical reasoning.

- Dreier argued that, while we might not have a reason to care about the rules of some system, it does not make sense to take this attitude toward the rules of rationality. Rationality is a system of privileged rules. Respecting the rules of rationality, in particular (M/E), is a categorical imperative.

- In his classic "Internal and External Reasons", Bernard Williams provided us with an argument for the conclusion that all reasons for action depend on (via a "sound deliberative route") a person's subjective motivational set. There aren't any external (i.e., motivation-independent) reasons for action. External reasons would not be able to explain action.

- Korsgaard counters the Humean, such as Williams. She argued that Hume's claim for the motivational inefficacy of reason depended on an impoverished understanding of the content of reason. And, she softens the concept of 'in-

ternalism' to the claim that reasons are motivating to the extent that we are rational.

- Mark Schroeder argued for a Humean Theory of Reasons, according to which all reasons for action are desire dependent. Against the No Background Conditions view, he argued that desires do not partially constitute our reasons. Hence, we needn't think about them when deliberating well, nor is this view objectionably self-regarding. Schroeder also takes the unusual position (for a Humean) that there are agent-neutral reasons that apply to an agent regardless of what desires she has, so long as she has some desires. One could easily question whether it is possible for the Humean to account for many of the supposed agent-neutral reasons in this manner. Schroeder also holds that the strength of a reason is generally not proportional to the strength of the desire(s) on which it depends.

- Setiya offered a radically different conception of good practical reasoning. Central to his theory is the claim that the standards for practical reasoning cannot be derived from the nature of practical reasoning (agency, or related concepts) itself. This claim is a denial of ethical rationalism. The Instrumentalist, for example, thinks that the nature of practical reasoning informs us that good practical reasoning consists in finding adequate means to our ends. But, Setiya denies that this is always good practical reasoning. He also objects to arguments for Instrumentalism that depend on the Humean Theory of Motivation. He thinks that belief (reason) can motivate desire.

Setiya also argued against the view that when we act for reasons we always do so under the guise of the good. Instead, he opts for an explanatory, rather than a justificatory, conception of reasons for action.

Setiya holds that good practical reasoning is simply practical reasoning that manifests the general character traits that are virtuous. There aren't distinctive virtues of practical reasoning.