

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar

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Stocker, "Desiring the Bad: An Essay in Moral Psychology"

- Many conflate these two distinct situations: 1) failing to do (or even attempt) what one has decided to do, and 2) failing to decide to do what they judge best. These are two different kinds of weakness. Stocker's will discuss the second kind of weakness. His theme will be that philosophers have oversimplified, in a problematic fashion, the relations between evaluative judgments and motivation.

I.

- Stocker briefly discusses some of the reasons why many philosophers have thought that we are motivated only by the good. He also claims that this is the dominant position.

II.

- Stocker does not offer an account of goodness or motivation, as his claims are quite general.

- An interesting thesis under consideration is whether acts attract us only because they are (believed) good. And Stocker will argue against this thesis by presenting cases in which we are attracted to some act only because it is (believed) bad or in spite of its (believed) badness. (741)

III.

- Story: The politician who is no longer concerned with the good of others. It may be that this lack of concern is simply due to bitterness or dislike, without there being any competing (believed) good explaining the politician's lack of concern. One can also simply be motivationally indifferent to something that one judges to be worth pursuing.

Lack of this desire is commonplace. Through spiritual or physical tiredness, through accidie, through weakness of body, through illness, through general apathy, through despair, through inability to concentrate, through a feeling of uselessness or futility, and so

on, one may feel less and less motivated to seek what is good.
(744)

So, we needn't be motivationally attracted to the (believed) good.

- Stocker also claims that one is not necessarily irrational for failing to pursue the (believed) good. (745)

IV.

- Now Stocker will argue that we are (or could be) sometimes motivated to act by (believed) badness. Stocker notes that one could always say that cases that appear to fit this model are really motivated by some desire for a (believed) good — e.g., one could claim that the desire to harm others is motivated by the desire for the (believed) good of having power over others. But, apart from wanting to save the dominant theory, why think that such desires for the (believed) good are always present?

But I do not think they are correct. Just as helping another can be the direct and proper object of desires and appetites, so can harming others. (748)

V.

- Stocker's claims are supposed to hold for ordinary human beings, not just for psychopaths or sociopaths.
- Stocker comments on cases in which motivation is in accord with evaluation. Just like mood, energy, etc. explain one's failure to be motivated by the (believed) good, these same psychic states explain one's motivation by the (believed) good. Stocker concludes with four programmatic claims, on pp. 752–753, for moral psychology.