Phenomenology and the Normativity of Practical Reason

I. The Humean Conception of Practical Reason.

Hume's account of the relation of reason to the passions implies that we can reason only about means, not ultimate ends. As Hume says,

> Where a passion is neither founded on false suppositions, nor chuses means insufficient for the end, the understanding can neither justify nor condemn it. 'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.[1]

Should someone fail to care about the things we value, about the welfare of others, or even about his or her own welfare, there are, on Hume's account, no rational grounds for criticism.[2]

For contemporary Humeans, something like Hume's conclusion regarding reason in its practical applications is thought to follow from a Humean moral psychology—a moral psychology distinctly different from Hume's, but assumed to be similar in its spirit and import. According to the Humean moral psychology, beliefs and desires are "distinct existences" defined by their different directions of fit. If the propositional content of a belief fails to fit the world, it is in the nature of belief that it is to change or be changed to match the world; if the propositional content of a desire fails to fit the world, it is in the nature of desire that the world is to be changed to match the desire.[3]

The implication is that there are no entailment relations or conceptual connections between a subject's holding a set of beliefs and his or her having, or being justified in having, any particular set of noninstrumental or underived desires. Regardless of how outrageous or alien a subject's noninstrumental desires may seem, there need be no way in which the subject's beliefs differ from ours and no way in which they fail to match the world. Indeed, there is nothing about the factual nature of the world that

[1] David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, L. A. Selby-Bigge, ed. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1896), p. 416.

[2] Hume, pp. 413-418.

[3] On Humean moral psychology, see Michael Smith, The Moral Problem (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), pp. 8-13. On the complex relations between the Humean theory of moral psychology and Hume's actual theories, official and otherwise, see John Bricke, Mind and Morality: An Examination of Hume's Moral Psychology (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), chs. 1 and 2.

the subject must be missing. Thus we have the apparent impossibility of appealing to reason to change the subject's ends construed as the objects of underived desires. Moreover, we have the characteristically Humean conception of practical reason as concerned only with the means to antecedently established ends. In addition, it is an assumption of the Humean moral psychology that the explanation of action is in terms of beliefs and desires so understood. And in the context of this Humean framework, it has seemed natural to assume that the agent's reason for acting is what explains why the agent did what he or she did.[4]

II. The Sidgwickean Objection (Sidgwick, Nagel, Parfit).

A number of considerations have been advanced to counter or undermine the Humean conception of practical reason. Consider the following argument.

> 1. Extreme imprudence is irrational.

Suppose you know now, at age 20, that at age 70 you will want very much to have an adequate income. And suppose you also know now that by making a very slight sacrifice—saving a very small amount on a regular basis—you can make a very large contribution to your income at 70. Suppose, however, that because you now care nothing about the satisfaction of your desires at 70, you refuse to save. Such extreme imprudence is, we normally assume, the very paradigm of irrational behavior.

> 2. If a subject does not care now about his or her future desires, the Humean (strictly, the Humean present-aim theorist, who holds that rationality requires that one choose the means to the satisfaction of the strongest of one's actual present desires) is committed to holding that for that subject even extreme imprudence is rational, or at least not irrational.[5]
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> 3. Hence, the Humean account of irrationality (and so of rationality) is inadequate.

The intended implication, of course, is that we should adopt a theory of rationality and practical reason according to which we can, on rational grounds, justify or criticize at least some ultimate ends or noninstrumental (underived) desires.[6] There is

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[4] See Bernard Williams,"Internal and External Reasons," in Ross Harrison, ed., Rational Action (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), reprinted in Williams, Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 102.

[5] On the present-aim theory, see Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) pp. 92-95.

[6] This point seems implicit in Sidgwick's remarks on Egoism when he says,

a further intention associated with at least some of the appeals to Sidgwickean considerations: to call into question the Humean moral psychology that gives rise to the purely instrumental conception of rationality.[7]

But the argument that the Humean cannot account for the intuitive irrationality of extreme imprudence is hardly conclusive. The Humean can simply bite the bullet (as Hume himself seems to) and deny (1).

III. The Strengthened Sidgwickean Objection (Parfit).

The anti-Humean, however, can point to forms of behavior that are, intuitively, even more obviously irrational than imprudence: the varieties of so-called "pathological indifference."[8] And these are, allegedly, kinds of behavior whose irrationality the Humean must deny. Examples include:

> 1. Future-Tuesday-Indifference. One cares about one's future in the normal way except as regards future Tuesdays. Though one cares now about one's desires on future days other than Tuesday, one cares nothing about those that occur on a Tuesday. (Of course, when Tuesday comes, one will care about the satisfaction of one's (then) present desires in the usual way.) Thus one would choose now to experience the greatest pain on a future Tuesday in order to spare oneself the smallest discomfort on any other day and to forego the greatest pleasures on a future Tuesday in order to experience the mildest gratification at some other time.[9]

I do not see why the axiom of Prudence should not be questioned, when it conflicts with present inclination on a ground similar to that on which Egoists refuse to admit the axiom of Rational Benevolence. If the Utilitarian has to answer the question, 'Why should I sacrifice my own happiness for the greater happiness of another?' it must surely be admissible to ask the Egoist 'Why should I sacrifice a present pleasure for a greater one in the future. Why should I concern myself about my own future feelings any more than about the feelings of other persons?' Henry Sidgwick, The Methods of Ethics, seventh edition (London: Macmillan,1907), republished (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 418. Thomas Nagel, The Possibility of Altruism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 15-17. Parfit, pp. 137-149.

[7] Nagel, The Possibility of Altruism.

[8] See my "Rationality, Responsibility, and Pathological Indifference," in Owen Flanagan and Amelie Rorty, eds., Identity, Character, and Morality (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), reprinted with revisions in my, The Unity of the Self (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

[9] Parfit, p. 124

2. SoHo Indifference. This is the spatial analogue of future-Tuesday-indifference. One has the normal concern about the satisfaction of one's future desires except those that occur in SoHo, which one discounts completely.[10]

3. Desire under the M's. John loves Mary passionately, but only as long as she remains in a state whose name begins with 'M'. When she crosses the border from Maine to New Hampshire or Massachusetts to Rhode Island, he cannot see her as any different from anyone else.

Since we do normally discount the future (and sometimes quite heavily), it is not completely implausible for the Humean present-aim theorist to claim that imprudence need not be irrational. It is far more difficult to make this claim about pathological indifference, even though such a Humean theorist is committed to doing so.

IV. The Normativity Objection (Korsgaard, Kennett).

Some recent critics of the Humean conception of rationality have argued that it cannot make sense of the normativity of practical reason and so cannot make sense of practical reason at all. According to Christine Korsgaard, this is because whatever one does will be a case of one's acting on one's strongest desire. Thus it will be a case of one's acting rationally in the only sense to which the Humean can appeal. In particular, according to Korsgaard, the Humean lacks the resources to distinguish between a weak-willed agent and one with an unusual desire set. That is, the Humean account has no room for the distinction between two kinds of subjects: one whose failure to take the means to one of his or her desired ends is irrational and one who acts rationally on an unusual set of desires—a set in which the desire not to take the means is simply stronger than the desire for the end. Indeed, the Humean cannot avoid assimilating the former case to the latter.[11]

We might think here of Ahab of the original film version of Moby Dick. In a scene that does not occur on the book, Ahab, after losing his leg, must have the stump cauterized to save his life. When the time comes, Ahab resists, and the procedure is carried out against his will. The Humean, it seems, cannot interpret Ahab's resistance as anything other than his having a stronger desire to avoid the pain of the cauterization than to go on living—and his acting rationally on that basis. It seems, however, that although this is a possible interpretation of Ahab's resistance, there is another, and possibly more natural, one: that his behavior is weak willed and

[10] The example of SoHo indifference was suggested to me by Jerrold Katz.

[11] Christine Korsgaard, "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason," in Garrett Cullity and Berys Gaut, eds., Ethics and Practical Reason (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 229-231.

irrational.[12] And that the Humean cannot make sense of this latter interpretation seems to support the contention that the Humean conception of rationality is fundamentally flawed.

Jeanette Kennett pursues this point in her critique of the Humean conception of rationality and her argument for

> the possibility of the moral or prudential considerations attended to in deliberation providing reasons for action, independently of what we antecedently desire.[13]

Kennett follows James Dreier in arguing that even Humeans must accept the normativity of practical reason.[14] Kennet claims that

> If someone does not accept the means-end principle, and so sees no reason to adopt the acknowledged means to their ends, this deficiency cannot be remedied by furnishing them with another desire, for in so far as this gives them another end it will be subject to the same deficiency…[15]

And she goes on,

> An agent is not motivated simply by the belief-desire pair cited in a means-end explanation of action, she is motivated by the reason it provides; that is, she must be capable of recognizing that the fact that a particular action is a means to her end gives her a reason to perform that action.[16]

And she concludes,

> I suggest that the conclusions of practical reflection are not inescapably the product of existing desires and ends and may conflict with these. If this is so, it is difficult to see a principled way of ruling out the possibility of moral or prudential considerations attended to in deliberations providing reasons for

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[12] For a discussion of the difficulties in choosing between these interpretations and considerations suggesting that examples of extreme pain do not best illustrate the distinction between them, see Thomas Schelling, "Self-Command in Practice, in Policy, and in a Theory of Rational Choice," AEA Papers and Proceedings 74 (1984): 1-11, reprinted in his Strategies of Commitment and Other Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 76. In this connection it is interesting to consider the John Dunbar character in Dancing with Wolves, who resolves to commit suicide rather than allow his leg to be amputated without anesthesia.

[13] Jeanette Kennett, Agency and Responsibility: A Common-sense Moral Psychology (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 96.

[14] James Drieier, "Humean Doubts about the Practical Justification of Morality," in Cullity and Gaut, pp. 93-96.

[15] Kennett, p. 91.

[16] Kennett, pp. 91-92

> action, independently of what we antecedently desire. Certainly such considerations may fail to move us to action. But there can be no special problem for an account of practical reason here that is not also faced in the case where, though we desire our end, we fail to desire the means to that end.[17]

V. The Sophisticated Humean Reply (Frankfurt, Lewis, White).

The sophisticated Humean retains the fundamental Humean moral psychology of beliefs and desires, the standard belief-desire forms of explanation of action, and the assumption that (roughly) the agent's reasons for acting are what explain why the agent acted as he or she did. But the sophisticated Humean distinguishes between the motivational and evaluational strength of the agent's desires.

The distinction between motivational and evaluational strength might be made (as it is by Harry Frankfurt and David Lewis) as follows. Take as special those first order desires for which there are second (or higher) order desires that those first order desires should be the ones on which one acts.[18] The intuition would be that the first order desires for which such second (or higher) order desires exist would be one's "real" desires, one's commitments, or one's values. This intuition is difficult to sustain in light of the fact that one's second and higher order desires may themselves be just as irrational as desires of the first order. One might, for example, have a second order desire to act on all and only those desires not formed on Tuesdays.

This problem can be avoided if, instead of desires of higher order, we appeal to relations of support among first order desires.[19] Consider the desire to be a first-rate mathematician and the desire to be a famous mathematician (or at least one whose work is well known and well appreciated in mathematical circles). These desires are independent, and because they support one another, one would normally desire both. But (again normally), neither is desired as a means to the other. Rather, one's desire to share one's work with a wide, intelligent, and appropriately appreciative audience gives meaning to the desire for excellence, and vice versa. The character of Will in Good Will Hunting shows how the lack of a desire for recognition can undermine and

[17] Kennett, p. 96

[18] Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person, Journal of Philosophy 68 (1971): 5-20. David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume 63 (1989): 113-137, reprinted in his Papers in Ethics and Social Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 71.

[19] See my, "Rationality, Responsibility, and Pathological Indifference," in Owen Flanagan and Amelie Rorty, eds., Identity, Character, and Morality (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), reprinted with revisions in my, The Unity of the Self (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). As will become clear, this uber-Humean position is not the position that I currently hold and defend below. It is merely the position of an increasingly distant former self.

trivialize the desire for excellence. Because he has so little respect for the mathematical abilities of others, he has little motivation to strive for excellence in anything but a shallow way. Although he takes pride in his mathematical talent, he is unmotivated to work at a level that would demand more than he can "toss off" without significant effort or sacrifice.

Consider also the following examples.

> Jet-Set Peace Corps Worker. Imagine a Peace Corps worker whose desire to alleviate suffering in impoverished villages is beyond question. He works tirelessly, sixteen to eighteen hours a day from Monday to Friday, and has done so for several years. When Friday evening comes, however, he takes advantage of his family's connections and jets off to the most fashionable capitals of the world where he parties until Monday morning. Asked if there isn't something contradictory in his behaviour, he simply shrugs and says, "I work hard and I party hard."

In such a case, it seems, we may not be able to object to the strength or the sincerity of the desire to relieve suffering, but we can point to its shallowness. First, there is something shallow in this person's relation to the villagers with whom he works, since they may experience crises that do not end on Friday night. Thus his desire to alleviate suffering is not supported by a network of desires constituting the usual sorts of personal connections with the actual individuals with whom he works. Secondly, because the desire to alleviate suffering has this abstract and isolated character, if it were lost, there would be nothing to motivate this person to try to reinstate it. Were he to lose the desire, he could simply walk away from his Peace Corps work without a second thought. By contrast, were one to lose one's desire to do philosophy, one would have a great many desires that would motivate one to try to get it back.

> Person Who Doesn't Believe in Punishment. Imagine a person who doesn't believe in punishment because he takes a self-consciously and resolutely forward-looking perspective. Given this perspective, he sees no point, even if someone has caused serious suffering to others, in adding to the amount of suffering by punishing the offender. Of course this person believes in some form of social control, but he has, he claims, no beliefs that would underwrite the idea of punishment as required by justice.
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> Now imagine that a friend, recently deceased, who had done seminal work in his field, has been falsely accused of plagiarism. The person, as he sees it, has three alternatives. If he decides to use his remaining productive years to making the greatest contribution to aggregate utility, he will ignore the unjust accusation. For his friend has no other remaining friends and no relatives, and the work will have the same social utility regardless of who gets credit. Thus the person's contribution to aggregate utility will be maximized if he concentrates on research with the most direct social applications. If, however,

> he decides to maximize his own utility, he will concentrate on research projects with the greatest intrinsic intellectual interest. Finally, he can use the time that remains to vindicate his friend.
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> Imagine that he opts for the third alternative. When asked why, he says simply that he wants to "set the record straight". When pressed, however, he points to a number of analogies that make the decision more intelligible. He cites as an example his admiration for the medieval crafts ideal that allowed sculptors to devote as much attention to the parts of statues that would never be seen as to those that would. And he compares this ideal to his desire to set the record straight in the face of nearly complete public indifference. He also cites his taste for historians of marginalized groups, such as Richard Cobb and Eric Hobsbawm, his instinctive tendency to side with the underdog, and his admiration for the fact that his friend's work was done for it own sake. And he points to the analogy between such tastes, dispositions, and ideals and his current nonconsequentialist choice. And when pressed as to whether he sees an analogy between his attitude toward his friend and the backward-looking perspective in which punishment as opposed to treatment makes sense, he is forced to admit this much: that although he is no supporter of contemporary institutions of punishment, he cannot maintain, as he once did, that they presuppose a perspective he finds wholly unintelligible.

In terms of this relation of support among nonderived and noninstrumental desires, we can draw a plausible distinction between our <u>mere</u> desires and our values or commitments. Thus we can distinguish between the motivational and the evaluational strengths of our desires. Evaluational strength is largely a matter of support, rather than motivational strength. Well-supported desires, as we have seen, are those we would be motivated to strengthen or replace were they to wane or disappear. And poorly supported desires are those we would be motivated to eliminate were they to conflict with those whose support was significantly better. For example, given a strong interest in Bach and Brahms, were one's desire to hear Beethoven to wane, one would very likely be motivated to try to reinvigorate it—by listening to his less familiar works, by listening to overly familiar work played on original instruments, by enrolling in a course, and so forth.

On this sophisticated Humean account, rationality is a matter of one's acting on one's strongest desires in the evaluational sense, not on one's strongest desires in the motivational sense. It is of course a truism that if one acts, one acts on the desire that is motivationally strongest. But in doing so one may, on this account, act in the face of one's deepest values and commitments and in the face of what one thinks one ought to do in a suitably internal sense. When one does so, one acts irrationally—for example, out of weakness of the will, compulsion, or the like. And in so doing, one acts no differently than one would in acting on a desire to smoke that one would rather not have and rather not act upon, given that one had it.

In the case of prudence, there are many desires that would support a desire that one's desires when one is 70 be satisfied. Thus there are many desires that would motivate one's trying to cultivate this desire were it absent or to reinstate it were it lost. One might be motivated, for example, by the connections between one's remaining self-sufficient and the continuation of important relationships with others, one's ability to continue to pursue meaningful projects, one's present and continued sense of self-respect, and so forth. And, as we saw in the mathematics example, these relations of support need not be construed as means-end. Self-sufficiency, self-respect, meaningful relations, and meaningful projects are mutually supporting, each one lending content, meaning, and depth to the others.

Moreover, on the sophisticated Humean account (in contrast to the Humean present-aim theory), there are several useful things we can say about the alleged irrationality of pathological indifference. We are likely to assume that the pathological lack of desire (e.g., not to avoid pain in SoHo), will be unsupported, since it is based on an apparently arbitrary distinction. If it is, the sophisticated Humean (unlike the present-aim theorist) can say that action on the basis of such a desire set <u>is</u> irrational. And this could be for either of two reasons. If it is badly supported and conflicts with desires that are well supported, it would be like the desire to smoke, and to act on it would typically be weak willed. Alternatively, if all the desires were equally arbitrary and badly supported, this would in itself undermine one's autonomy and, hence, one's rationality. If, however, the desires of the SoHo-indifferent subject were all extremely well supported, then it seems that either the distinction would not be arbitrary or the motivational makeup have some instrumentally rationale. (One might, for example, schedule all one's dental work in SoHo and otherwise avoid it.)

With regards to Korsgaard's problem of the normativity of practical reason, the sophisticated Humean can make precisely the distinction that Korsgaard thinks is required. In the case of a painful procedure, we can interpret resistance in terms of a fully rational belief that continuing to live is not worth the pain of the treatment. Terminally ill patients, for example, often, make such rational decisions. Equally, however, we can, at least in some cases, make good sense of the idea that resistance is weak willed and irrational.

VI. The Real Problem of Weakness of the Will.

When we perform a weak-willed action, what makes it an <u>action</u>? For example, one takes a (5th) martini, even though one judges that all things considered it would be best to refrain. One's all-things-considered judgment never wavers as one takes it, and one's judgment is in no way confused or contradictory. It seems clear that in this case taking the martini is an action. But what is it in virtue of which it is something one does, not merely something that happens to one?

The suggestion that it is an action because it is behavior caused by an appropriate belief and desire in not the basis of an adequate account. In Davidson's well-known counterexample,

> A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never chose to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally.[20]

Moreover, we cannot, as some have suggested, require that the causal chains be "of the right kind," if this is understood as a matter of neurophysiology. For the detailed neurophysiology is a matter of subpersonal facts to which we normally have no access. And yet we know, ordinarily, which pieces of our behavior are actions and which are not.

Nor can we require that the causal chain go through an appropriate piece of practical reasoning. For in the case in which one takes the martini, the appropriate piece of reasoning tells one to refrain. Indeed, as we have seen, one may be completely lucid in one's judgment about what one should do, and one's judgment may never waver, even as one's hand moves toward the glass. Thus, it seems, it cannot be anything at the level of judgment that makes the movement an action.

VII. The Phenomenology of Agency and Value.

It will help in seeing what kinds of noncausal and nonjudgmental conditions are relevant to a piece of behavior's being an action, if we consider the following example.[21]

> The Passive Subject. Imagine that you have agreed to make a trip with a friend, and its success requires an early start. When you arrive at your friend's house at the appointed time, you are dismayed to find that he is still in bed. You suggest tactfully that the situation is not hopeless, but that the success of the trip depends on his being up and ready very shortly. Your friend readily agrees and professes his continued strong desire to make the trip, but makes no effort to move.

[20] Donald Davidson, "Freedom to Act," in Ted Honderich, ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), reprinted in Davidson's Essays on Actions and Events (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 79.

[21] See also my "Subjectivity and the Agential Perspective," in Mario De Caro and David Macarther, eds., Naturalism in Question (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 201-202.

> In response to your evidently increasing consternation, your friend hastens to explain. Whereas he had been normal the night before, when he awoke he found that he no longer understood the concept of action. Though your friend agrees with you about all the objective facts that can be stated without the agential vocabulary—that the trip will only have a chance of success if you are underway very soon, and so forth—the only response that he can make to your direct suggestion that he get up is that he hopes it happens. He finds himself forced, in other words, to translate your talk of doings into the only language he now understands—the language of happenings.
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> Interestingly, however, he has not lost the conceptual roles of the elements of the action vocabulary. He still knows all such "truths" as that normally we hold people responsible only for what they do, that only creatures with mental states are capable of action, and so forth. What he professes to have lost are not the inferential relations between propositions containing agential concepts. Rather it is the intelligibility of actually applying the agential vocabulary. In this respect he is like the anthropologist who knows the inferential roles of the witchcraft vocabulary employed by the people he studies, but sees it as having no application to the real world.

What is it we have that the passive subject lacks? By hypothesis the passive subject knows all the facts we know that can be expressed without the agential vocabulary. Moreover, he still retains the inferential role of that vocabulary, even if he sees no possibility of applying it to the world. Thus it seems that all he could lack is an experiential grounding—one that could give the vocabulary genuine content that would distinguish it from a formal calculus.

But what could such an "experiential grounding" be like? What does something look like when it looks like an opportunity or a threat to which one has to react? If the challenge is to provide an account in terms of apparent shapes, colors, and relative sizes, then, as I shall argue below, the question has no answer. But there is a large empirical and experimental literature on what we might call "rich perception," stemming from the work of Michotte on the perception of causation[22] and J. J. Gibson on the perception of "affordances."[23] These latter perceptual experiences include the perception of opportunities for action and the perception of things as given in their agentially relevant functional potentialities—things given, for example, as shelters, hiding places, or escape routes, as predators or prey. Recent work on such experience includes studies of the perception of animateness (i.e., being an original source of

[22] Albert Michotte, The Perception of Causality (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

[23] J. J. Gibson, The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception (Hillsdale, N. J.: Laurence Erlbaum, 1986), pp. 127-128, 134.

motion), intentionality, and agency.[24] This literature does not discuss the perception of values explicitly, but the agential and functional properties themselves, such as something's being a shelter, are clearly not value neutral.

There is, however, a deeper, nonempirical, reason why we must be given things as valuable. The Humean moral psychology explains action (and what it is to be an action) in terms of our having an appropriate belief and desire. But how are our desires given to us? Certainly our desires can be given to us from an objective point of view or, as I shall say, "as objects." A psychologist or neurophysiologist, for example, might tell you that you had a desire of which you had been completely unaware. But being the product of desires given in this way is not what being an action consists in, not what makes an action an action. For such desires have no appropriate internal connection to action. Their presence, and indeed our recognition of their presence (as such), provides no reason to act. Thus it cannot rationalize anything we do. With regard to desires given as objects, it makes perfect sense to ask why, by itself, the existence of such a desire of mine should be of any concern to me—or at least why it should be of any more concern to me than the existence of such a desire someone else's. Were a desire present and given only as an object, it would give one a reason to aim at its satisfaction only if one had some further desire to do so.

Imagine that a psychologist or neurophysiologist gives you the following information: You have a desire—as yet unrecognized, indeed as not yet manifest—for great wealth. Clearly this gives you no reason to leave philosophy and enroll in business school—none, at any rate, in the absence of some desire that this desire be satisfied. And where the desire for vast wealth is concerned you need have no such inclination. You might, in fact, pay a significant sum to have it removed.

This fact about desires given as objects would generate an infinite regress were there no other way in which desires could be given. And there is. Desires may be given as transparent. This is to be understood by analogy with the way in which tools and prosthetic devices, as well as perceptual experience, may be given. The blind person's stick, for example, is transparent when what he or she is given most directly is the object at the end of it. And our perception is transparent when what we are given most directly are real, as opposed to apparent, shapes, sizes, and colors—or indeed the real objects themselves. The analogy is this: when our desires are given transparently, they are given implicitly in the way the objects of those desires are given. And the objects of those desires are given as desirable.

But why shouldn't the objects of desires (when the desires are given to us transparently) be given as desired (by us)? But suppose that all I understand by

[24] See, for example, Dan Sperber, David Premack, and A. J. Premack, eds., Causal Cognition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

‘desire’ is desire as an object. (Such a desire might be understood in turn, for example, as a functional state of an organism.) Then, again, the fact that something is given as desired by me in this sense gives me no reason whatsoever to pursue it. It is merely one more fact about the objective world, like the fact (which might also be given in perception) that a particle is exerting an attraction on the ones around it. And, as such, this fact leaves it completely open how I should, by my own lights, respond. To say that the objects of desires are given as desired by us, in other words, cannot prevent the infinite regress that we have been at pains to avoid.

Moreover, it seems clear that the perception of something as prey is the perception of something "to be pursued"; the perception of something as an escape route is the perception of something "to be taken." Thus there is an internal connection of the right kind between the perception of functional properties and affordances of the Gibsonian kind and motivation. Therefore the representation of things as desirable in this sense seems obviously more basic and more primitive than the representation of things as desired by me. The thought that something might be desired by me though not necessarily desirable is an extremely sophisticated one. It requires, among other things, some notion of intentional states in general and at least some particular kinds of intentional states, the distinction between my intentional states and those of others, and some self-conscious access to my own intentional states, particularly my desires. And the problem of my access to my own desires simply raises the prospect of an infinite regress once again. Objective access is no help, and, in any case, obviously unavailable to such unsophisticated subjects as animals and children.

The Humean has no account of how a desire is given (how it is given to the subject at the personal level) when it is given "subjectively" in the normal way. (Hume’s own account in terms of a purely qualitative feeling attaching to an inert and neutral mental representation has, for good reason, not been seriously entertained by contemporary Humeans.) The only possibility, as we have seen, seems to be that it is given implicitly in its object’s being given as desirable or to be pursued, and so forth. The conclusion is that the perception of things as desirable is more basic than the explicit representation of them as (merely) desired by us, and that the latter is made possible by the former.[25]

We can see what this implies for phenomenology if we consider contemporary sense-datum theories of visual perception. According to such theories, what we are given most directly are the alleged visual properties of objects—apparent shapes, colors, and relative sizes. (This is the contemporary analogue of the empiricist

[25] I defend the priority of the perceptual experience of things as valuable over linguisticly formulated judgments on the basis of a transcendental argument in my “The Transcendental Significance of Phenomenology,” in Psyche 13/1 (April, 2007) available at http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/

phenomenologies of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.)[26] My claim is that relative to these theories, we have an inflationary/deflationary phenomenology. What we are given most directly in visual perception (at the personal level) is in some respects much richer and in other respects much more impoverished than sense-datum theories allow.[27]

> 1. On the Side of Deflation. Asked to draw the apparent shape of their car windshield as seen from the driver's seat, most subjects are incapable of producing an even rough approximation. Similarly, subjects cannot accurately compare the apparent lengths of their hands (when held four inches from their eyes) with the apparent widths of their feet. Examples such as these suggest that normally the apparent visual properties of objects are accessible to us only very indirectly, if at all. (The deflationary point is relevant to virtue theory as discussed below.)
>
> 2. On the Side of Inflation. Seeing things as desirable is, as we have seen, the way in which our desires are normally given to us. And our desires being given to us in this way (transparently) is the only way in which they have their normal motivational efficacy.

Value perception is, we might say, nonjudgmental, at least in the sense that it is not linguistic-descriptive. The perceptual system, at least with respect to what is given to the subject at the personal level, is not structured like a language, and its deliverances lack an inferential structure that could put them in direct conflict with our linguistically formulated judgments.

VIII. The Normativity of Practical Reason Reconsidered.

How, then, does the inflationary/deflationary phenomenology solve the problem of the normativity of practical reason? The weak-willed action is an action in virtue of its object's being given as valuable in perception. This perception provides what John McDowell evidently, and rightly, requires—the presentation of the object as desirable.[28] Such perception, however, need not be assumed to be veridical. There is

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[26] See Bertrand Russell, Problems of Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), A. J. Ayer, The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge (London, Macmillan, 1962), R. J. Swartz, ed., Perceiving, Sensing, and Knowing (New York: Doubleday, 1965), sec. 2.

[27] On the notions of an inflation and deflation, see my "Skepticism, Deflation, and the Rediscovery of the Self," The Monist 87 (2004): 275-298, "Subjectivity and the Agential Perspective," "Empirical Psychology, Transcendental Phenomenology, and the Self," in Massimo Marraffa, Mario De Caro, Francesco Ferretti, eds., Cartographies of the Mind: Philosophy and Psychology in Intersection (Dordrecht: Sprinter, 2007), and "The Transcendental Significance of Phenomenology".

[28] McDowell says, for example,

an analogy with the Muller Lyer lines and other examples of visual illusion--the perceptual experience can persist in the face of disbelief. In the case of value perception, the paranoid may see two strangers who are merely talking as conspiring against him, even though he is fully aware of how unlikely this is.

Because the perceptual content is nonconceptual or nonjudgmental content, one does not contradict oneself or waver or change one's mind at the level of judgment. Indeed, one's judgment need be in no way clouded at all. This is necessary for a case of genuine weakness of the will. Desirability, as we have seen, is given in a more fundamental way than our own desires. Indeed, we have seen something stronger—it is only as given implicitly in the perception of the desirability of their objects that our recognition of our desires has any internal connection with motivation.

IX. The Answer to "The Moral Problem."

Michael Smith's discussion of what he terms "the moral problem" suggests that the following triad is inconsistent.[29]

> 1. Cognitivism: Evaluative statements express genuine beliefs (as opposed to expressing attitudes or emotions or having an imperatival analysis).
>
> 2. Internalism: The sincere belief in a genuine evaluative statement is internally (conceptually) connected with an appropriate form of motivation—e.g., motivation to pursue or support the thing which is positively evaluated.
>
> 3. Humean Moral Psychology: Beliefs and desires are separate existences defined by their different directions of fit. This means that what we believe implies nothing about what we desire and hence that there can be no internal connections between beliefs and desires.

A phenomenology that allows for the direct perception of things as valuable allows us to deny (3). Such perception can be, as we have seen, accurate or inaccurate. Hence

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> The idea of value experience involves taking admiration, say, to represent an object [for example, virtue] as having a property that… is conceived to be not merely such as to elicit [admiration]… but rather such as to merit it.
>
> "Value and Secondary Qualities," in Ted Honderich ed., Morality and Objectivity (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), reprinted in McDowell, Mind, Value, and Reality (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 143.

[29] Michael Smith, The Moral Problem (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 11-13. Smith's triad involves moral judgments rather than evaluative statements, but the latter seem to raise the same problems. Arguably they do so in an even more pressing form. And in focusing on evaluative statements rather than, say, 'ought' statements, I do not intend to beg any questions on the issues that divide consequentialists and deontologists. The value perception with which I'm primarily concerned is equally well described as our seeing things as valuable (in specific ways), as our seeing things as "to be pursued," as our experiencing the world as making certain demands on us, and so forth.

the requirement of cognitivism is satisfied. But there is also an internal connection with motivation. That is, one will be motivated to pursue, support etc., the things one perceives as valuable to the extent that one is rational. And notice that the italicized clause does not trivialize the criterion of internalism, since the irrationality in question will take the form of weakness of the will (or some related form), and the inflationary/deflationary phenomenology gives us a substantive account of such weakness consists in. In particular, we have an account that distinguishes the weak-willed subject from the rational subject who simply has an unusual set of desires

X. The Implications for Virtue Theory.

The standard examples of weakness of the will (e.g., taking the martini) lead us to assume that when value perception conflicts with judgment, rationality requires that we side with the latter. We assume, that is, that in such conflicts we must identify with our all-things-considered judgment about what it is best to do. But just as the deliverances of the perceptual system may be illusions of value (martini case), so the deliverances of the judgmental system may be shallow, self-deceived, or for various other reasons amount to little more than rationalizations.

> Huckleberry Finn. Huck Finn believes that because his friend and companion is a fugitive slave, it is his moral duty to turn him in to the authorities. However, because of the depth of his feelings for Jim and the particularities of their shared experiences and context, he cannot bring himself to do so—even though he is seriously disturbed by his failure to "do right." From our vantage point, however, it is clear that his decision not to turn Jim in represents his best and deepest self. And we see his judgment to the contrary as the product of a very superficial commitment to the immoral ideology of his community.[30]

Moreover, as the example suggests, the perceptual system may deliver results that would be otherwise unavailable. The inflationary phenomenology is necessary to account for the personal-level psychology of expertise. As Hubert Dreyfus and others have argued, the expertise of the best chess players is largely the result of their perceiving chess positions immediately as highly structured contexts of strengths and weaknesses. They are given, then, in a form of perception with features importantly like Gibson's affordances. And the positions are perceived in the light of a network of analogies and disanalogies with previously encountered positions and games—perception that allows the experts to see, in a literal and immediate way, what is to be done.[31] This is in marked contrast to the style of play of nonexperts and of the most sophisticated chess playing programs. And it means that neither the deliverances of

[30] The Annotated Huckleberry Finn, Michael Patrick Hearn, ed., (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), pp. 153-157.

[31] Hubert Dreyfus and Stuart Dreyfus, "What is Morality?" A Phenomenological Account of the Development of Ethical Expertise," in David Rasmussen ed., Universalism and Communitarianism (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990). See especially pp. 242-249.

the most sophisticated rules internalized by those who lack expertise, nor the deliverances of the rules embodied in the most sophisticated programs can match the perceptual capacities of the best players.

This account of perception is important in helping us appreciate Aristotle's claim that the virtuous person is in some sense superior to the person who is merely continent—a claim that McDowell has been criticized for endorsing.[32] For suppose the advantage that the virtuous person has over the merely continent person is simply motivational in character—the virtuous person sees what is required and immediately acts on the perception without being tempted by other alternatives. In this case it is not at all clear why we should value the virtuous person more. Intuitively, the continent person who is tempted to run from the battle but stands his ground seems at least as admirable as the virtuous person who is never tempted at all. The puzzle is removed if we think of the advantage that the virtuous person has as importantly cognitive in nature. The virtuous person arrives at decisions about what to do simply by seeing what the context requires. And in the relevant contexts such decisions are superior to those of the continent person who weighs alternatives and balances competing claims.

We would, then, be well advised not to think of virtue theory exclusively or primarily in terms of virtues like courage in battle. In such cases there is usually little doubt as to what we ought to do and the problem is one of motivation—the necessity of overcoming fear for example. Rather we should think in terms of virtues such as kindness and in cases of some genuine complexity. In such cases there is often no lack of motivation, but it is frequently difficult to know what kindness in the truest sense requires.

> Cries and Whispers. In Ingmar Bergman's film, a woman's relatives all try to give her solace and comfort as she is dying, but each one fails. Although the efforts of each of her relatives are sincere, only the family servant is capable of doing what kindness requires under the circumstances.

Though Dreyfus, who defends a version of virtue theory, has, following Merleau-Ponty, long seen the necessity of an inflationary phenomenology, he has no real counterpart of the deflationary phenomenology that lets us say that in some cases we are given external objects directly, without there being anything to which we have access independently of our access to those objects. This is not to deny that there is a sequence of causal connections in virtue of which we perceive the objects in the way we do. Rather it is to say that at the personal level there is nothing we are given more directly than the objects themselves. And this inability to make sense of our being given external objects directly leaves Dreyfus vulnerable to skeptical worries of

[32] See John McDowell, "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume52 (1978): 13-29, reprinted in Mind, Value, and Reality, pp. 91-93. Kennett, pp. 35-37.

exactly the sort raised by Hume's argument for scepticism about the external world.[33] As Dreyfus says in connection with The Matrix

> Given the conceivability of the brain-in-the-vat fantasy, the most that we can be sure of is that our coping experience reveals that we are directly up against some boundary conditions independent of our coping—boundary conditions with which we must get in sync in order to cope successfully. In this way, our coping experience is sensitive to the causal powers of these boundary conditions. Whether these independent causal conditions have the structure of an independent physical universe discovered by science, or whether the boundary conditions as well as the causal structures are both the effect of an unknowable thing in itself that is the ground of appearances as postulated by Kant, or even whether the cause of all appearances is a computer is something we could never know from inside our world.[34]

McDowell, who is far more attuned to the threat of skepticism, is unwilling to allow for the existence of a perceptual system which is sufficiently independent of the system of linguistically formulated judgments to provide an account of the possibility of weakness of the will.[35] What is required, then, is that we see the possibility of a phenomenology that, relative to that of the sense-datum theorist, is both inflationary and deflationary.

XI. The Adjudication of Conflicts between Value Perceptions and Judgments.

The sophisticated Humean scheme for adjudicating between conflicting (nonderived) desires can be retained even though we abandon the Humean moral psychology. Relations of support in the form of meaning giving analogies are now thought of as holding between values. And someone who (say) does not understand the backward-looking perspective integral to punishment can come to appreciate it in ways that it is perfectly reasonable to call rational. This essentially coherentist approach works between value perceptions, between value judgments, and between value perceptions and value judgments.

[33] Hume, p. 212. Cf. Barry Stroud, "Skepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge," Journal of Philosophy 81 (1984): 545-551, reprinted in Linda Martin Alcoff, ed., Epistemology: The Big Questions (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 363-364. Of course, nothing I have said here rules out the possibility that such skepticism is correct. My purpose here is simply to contrast my conception of phenomenology with those of Dreyfus and McDowell. For a discussion of the relation between phenomenology, transcendental arguments, and skepticism, see "The Transcendental Significance of Phenomenology."

[34] Hubert Dreyfus and Stuart Dreyfus, "Existential Phenomenology and the Brave New World of The Matrix," in Christopher Grau, ed. Philosophers Explore The Matrix (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 79.

[35] For this criticism of McDowell, see Kennett, pp. 28-30.

As the chess analogy suggests, value perception is highly theory (and practice) laden, so the perceptions and judgments are to some extent made for each other. Moreover, we can, if circumstances require, bring the contents of particular items in our perceptual system into the explicit linguistic form of our system of judgments. We do so through a process by which we articulate to ourselves, and thereby make discursively explicit, what had been implicit in various relevant perceptual experiences—a process like that by which the person who does not believe in punishment comes, nonetheless, to recognize the significance of the backward-looking perspective in the domain of his value commitments. Such explicit forms of recognition, however, are necessarily given against the background of the implicit deliverances of the perceptual system.

Thus the perspective that takes virtue as basic is fully compatible with the full critical use of our judgmental capacities to correct our tendencies toward value illusions such as those of the paranoid. But short of this coherentist approach, there is no quick route to the adjudication between what purport to be value perceptions and our evaluative judgments—even philosophers are capable of rationalization, and even paranoids have enemies.

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