

PHIL 260; Spring 2007

The Normativity of Ethics

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Handout #5: Anti-Rationalism and Internalism about Practical Reason

Given these worries about strategic ethical egoism, we might conclude that morality and rationality are two **independent** points of view. We might agree that morality is impartial but insist that practical reason is instrumental or prudential. If so, we can see how there might be conflicts between practical reason and other-regarding morality, because other-regarding duties need not always advance the agent's own aims and interests. If there can be such conflicts, then immoral action is not necessarily irrational. If so, we should reject the rationalist element in the problematic about the authority of morality. On this view, the **authority**, but not the scope or content, of morality depends on the aims or interests of agents.

FOOT'S ANTI-RATIONALISM

Foot illustrates one version of anti-rationalism in "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives." She motivates this form of anti-rationalism by noting an ambiguity within Kantian rationalism. Kant, of course, distinguishes between hypothetical and categorical imperatives.

Now all imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. The former represent the practical necessity of a possible action as a means of attaining something else that one wants [will] (or may possibly want) [wolle]. The categorical imperative would be one which represented an action as objectively necessary in itself, without reference to another end [Groundwork 414].

Here and elsewhere (KpV 20-21) Kant claims that hypothetical imperatives are conditional on what an agent wants (or wills). If so, instrumental imperatives are hypothetical imperatives. But he must also think that prudential imperatives are hypothetical. For prudential imperatives presumably represent action as necessary to achieve a distinct end, viz. the agent's happiness or interest. And Kant clearly regards Greek eudaimonist theories as heteronomous and, hence, as containing only hypothetical imperatives (KpV 24, 64-65, 109, 111-13). If so, we can understand hypothetical imperatives to be conditional on whether the conduct enjoined promotes the agent's antecedent aims or interests, whereas categorical imperatives are not.

- **Hypothetical imperatives** are conditional on whether the conduct enjoined promotes the agent's antecedent interests or desires.
- **Categorical imperatives** are unconditional demands.

Kant famously claims that moral requirements express categorical, rather than hypothetical, imperatives (416). Following Foot, we might identify two distinguishable claims here.

- In one sense, imperatives are categorical just in case they **apply** to people independently of their aims or interests.

If so, let us say that they express **categorical norms**. The **inescapability** thesis claims that moral requirements express categorical norms.

- In another sense, imperatives are categorical just in case they **provide pro tanto reason for action**, independently of the agent's contingent empirical aims and interests.

If so, let us say that they enjoy **rational authority**. The **authority** thesis claims that moral requirements possess rational authority.

We might think that we cannot separate the inescapability and authority theses. Consider this line of reasoning (discussed in Handout #3).

1. If a moral requirement to ϕ applies to me, there is a moral reason for me to ϕ .
2. If there is a moral reason for me to ϕ , there is a reason for me to ϕ .
3. If there is a reason for me to ϕ , it would be pro tanto irrational for me to fail to ϕ .
4. Hence, if a moral requirement to ϕ applies to me, it has at least pro tanto rational authority.

Foot implies that this argument is not compelling. Sometimes when we say that I have a reason to ϕ , we mean

- (a) There is a behavioral norm that enjoins ϕ -ing and applies to me.

In this sense of reason, moral norms do imply reasons. There are as many kinds of reasons as there are norms, including moral reasons, legal reasons, occupational reasons, and reasons of etiquette. But we often have something more in mind in ascribing reasons.

- (b) There is a behavioral norm that enjoins ϕ -ing, it applies to me, and it would be pro tanto irrational for me not to ϕ .

If there is reason, in this sense, to act on a norm, then practical reason endorses this norm. But Foot claims, plausibly, that not all reasons for action in the first sense are reasons for action in the second sense. For instance, it is arguable that failure to conform to requirements or reasons of etiquette or law need not be pro tanto irrational. But then moral requirements might be categorical norms without enjoying categorical authority.

Though Kant clearly accepts both inescapability and authority theses, Foot argues -- by analogy with etiquette -- that only the inescapability thesis is plausible. Foot is right that inescapability and authority are distinct claims. But her denial of authority rests on a brute appeal to instrumental or prudential assumptions about practical reason.

... [I]t is supposed [by Kant and others] that moral considerations necessarily give reasons for acting to any man. The difficulty is, of course, to defend this proposition which is more often repeated than explained. ... The fact is that the man who rejects morality because he sees no reason to obey its rules can be convicted of villainy but not of inconsistency. Nor will his action necessarily be irrational. Irrational actions are those in which a man in some way defeats his own purposes, doing what is calculated to be disadvantageous or to frustrate his ends. Immorality does not **necessarily** involve any such thing [Virtues and Vices, pp. 161-2].

We might ask whether Foot's position requires her to treat etiquette and morality as equally authoritative.

At times, she suggests that the special authority is an unnecessary illusion, the product of moral indoctrination. However, she can say that morality is nonetheless more important than etiquette if some hypothetical imperatives can be more authoritative than others. She could appeal to the claim that a significant part of morality should be understood to consist in familiar norms of unprovoked nonaggression, cooperation, fair play, and fidelity, the general observance of which is mutually advantageous. This would explain the important stake that most of us have most of the time in moral behavior and the evident interest we take in each other's moral behavior (and moral education). But because mutual advantage and individual advantage come apart both extensionally and counterfactually – as we saw in discussing strategic egoism – the resulting view would be a form of anti-rationalism.

For some, it would be nice to be able to show that those who don't have promoral sentiments have reason to acquire them and that those that do have reason to retain them. This would apparently require rationalism. The rationalist might question Foot's assumptions about practical reason, as the friends of impartial practical reason (e.g. Nagel) do. Foot could appeal to Williams's defense of internal reasons.

WILLIAMS ON INTERNAL REASONS

Williams contrasts internal and external reasons. Internal reasons are relative to an agent's "subjective motivational set"; whereas, external reasons are not (101-2). He proceeds to argue that external reasons are impossible and to defend internal reasons. It might be useful to bear in mind some facts about internal reasons, as Williams understands them.

- The relevant elements of an agent's subjective motivational set are her desires, broadly construed (to include projects and loyalties) (101, 105).
- Internalism need not appeal to actual desires if these are based on false beliefs about instrumental means (102-3).
- So one can be mistaken about one's internal reasons.
- Internal reasons can be relativized to desires an agent would have after suitable deliberation on and from her initial (pre-deliberative) desires (104-5).
- Williams is vague about what can count as suitable deliberation (105, 110).
- Deliberation cannot involve discovery of facts about value or practical reason, for then the new motivation (desire) would not depend on the old.
- Perhaps Williams has in mind content-neutral forms of deliberation, such as full non-normative information, good means-ends reasoning, and vivid appreciation of the antecedents and consequences of one's alternatives.

Those are some main aspects of Williams's version of internalism. But that still doesn't explain why we should endorse internalism. Does Williams do more than subject externalism to the incredulous stare? Williams's official rationale for internalism appeals to links between motivation and possible explanation (106-7). But this appeal faces a dilemma.

- **Actual** explanation seems too strong a condition. Explanatory reasons need not justify, and justifying reasons need not explain. Moreover, because an agent might have false beliefs about her internal reasons, they will not always explain her behavior.
- **Potential** explanation seems too weak a condition. Even external reasons are potentially explanatory; all else being equal, they would explain an agent's behavior were she to accept them.

An alternative strategy is to see Williams as appealing to the sort of **resonance** or **non-alienation** requirement of the sort at work in his earlier criticism of utilitarianism and other impartial moral theories -- the demands of practical reason must be capable of sustaining an agent's emotional and motivational engagement. On this reading, Williams defends internalism in something like the following way.

1. Practical reason must meet the resonance constraint.
2. Hence, practical reason must be capable of motivating agents.
3. Motivation involves desire.
4. New desire can only be produced by content-neutral deliberation from pre-existing ultimate desire.
5. Hence, practical reason must be relativized to pre-existing ultimate desire.

Notice that because internalism about practical reason relativizes practical reason to variable desire, it can apparently explain a common kind of **pluralism** about practical reason, viz. that there often seem to be multiple reasonable life plans, activities, and commitments.

Notice, however, that internalism about practical reason derives pluralism from a kind of content-neutrality or relativism about practical reason. We might wonder if this is an attractive way to defend pluralism. Because internalism about practical reason relativizes practical reason to ultimate desires, which are themselves neither reasonable nor unreasonable, it appears committed to some revisionary claims about practical reason. In particular, we might raise questions about the **normative adequacy** of this sort of internalism. The normative adequacy of a conception of practical reason arguably has two main dimensions: normative accommodation and the provision of a normative rationale.

- **Normative Accommodation:** All else being equal, we should prefer a conception of practical reason that accommodates more of our reflective judgments about the normative valence of various actual and hypothetical states of affairs. No conception may provide perfect accommodation, but, all else being equal, we should prefer a conception that minimizes the attribution of reflective normative error (cf. the method of reflective equilibrium).
- **Normative Rationale:** All else being equal, we should prefer a conception of practical reason for which we can explain why we should care about or invest significance in conforming to its demands.

But once we articulate these standards of normative adequacy, we may wonder how well Williams' internalist conception of practical reason meets them.

- The internalist conception arguably provides poor accommodation and lack a satisfactory rationale.
 - Accommodation
 - On some views, moral requirements have categorical authority (whether or not they are supreme). Of course, this is the issue currently under dispute.
 - Many think that gross imprudence is unconditionally irrational.
 - Many think that shallow aspirations (e.g. lint collection) are unconditionally bad for someone with a normal range of talents.
 - Such views would seem to counsel unrestricted adaptation of desire so as to maximize the satisfaction of desire (cf. Epicureans), but unrestricted adaptation of desire seems problematic. We don't in general increase the reasonableness of our plans by lowering our aspirations even if we thereby increase the frequency of our successes.
 - Appeal to content-neutral idealization does not solve these problems and introduces new ones.
 - Can we combine vivid appreciation of the merits of wildly disparate perspectives into one overall evaluative perspective (Rosati, Sobel)?
 - We can't rule out the possibility that full and vivid confrontation with the facts would shape desire in perverse ways (Gibbard).
 - Rationale
 - It's not clear why we should care about the satisfaction of desire, regardless of its historical pedigree or content.

These worries about normative adequacy are perhaps reasons to doubt the conclusion of Williams' argument, but, by themselves, they don't tell us where the argument goes wrong. That argument turns crucially on premises (3) and (4). (3) is sometimes represented as the Humean theory of motivation. (4) could be represented as the Humean theory about practical reason, that reason can only be the slave of the passions. We could try to block the conclusion by putting our foot in the door at either point.

Some, such as Nagel and McDowell, we have seen, reject (3), offering purely cognitive theories of motivation. (3) is supported by Smith, Stampe, and others who explain intentional action as the product of representational states, such as belief, and practical states, such as desire, which are distinguished by their different directions of fit to the world. Roughly, beliefs are intentional states that aim to conform to the world, whereas desires are intentional states that aim to make the world conform to them. We should reject (3) only if we are prepared to reject the directions of fit conception of belief and desire.

Alternatively, one might reject (4), claiming that desire can be responsive to reason. If we can reason about the value or appropriateness of desires, then we can form beliefs about how the world ought to be. But given (3)'s conception of belief and desire, such beliefs would normally – though not necessarily -- produce desires to make the world be as it ought to be. If we accept (3) but reject (4), we accept the Humean dictum that action requires desire but reject the Humean dictum that reason can only be the slave of the passions. We can also say that Williams's defense of internal reasons depends on a prior -- but undefended -- commitment to skepticism about the powers of practical reason. This is like Korsgaard's complaint about Williams.

What does this imply about internalism? We need to distinguish two different interpretations of internalism.

- The **Ecumenical** Thesis: practical reason must be capable of motivating agents.
- The **Sectarian** Thesis: practical reason must be relativized to antecedent desire.

Williams argues from the Ecumenical to the Sectarian Thesis, but this depends upon assuming that reason cannot be responsive to desire. Instead, the directions-of-fit conceptions of belief and desire should make us believe that reason can be responsive to desire. But then we can and should accept the Ecumenical Thesis without the Sectarian Thesis.