

DISCUSSION

SLAVES OF THE PASSIONS? ON SCHROEDER'S NEW HUMEANISM

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In his impressive book, Mark Schroeder defends a Humean theory of normative reasons.¹ He takes this to be the view that all normative reasons are to be explained by reference to some desire of the agent who has the reason. He calls his particular version of this theory *hypotheticalism*, and I shall do the same. His defence of hypotheticalism is clever, and the book is inspiringly clear. Those working on reasons for action cannot ignore this book, both for the excellent summation of the prior literature on the topic, as well as for a forceful, interesting, and original contribution to the area.

However, I do not think that Schroeder's defence of hypotheticalism succeeds. I have two main charges against his view. First, it violates a constraint on deliberation. If our desires have a special place in explaining our reasons (even if they are not themselves reasons), then they may sometimes feature in this special place in practical deliberation. But they should never feature in this special place: so they cannot explain our reasons. Second, it generates too many reasons. He claims that any proposition whose truth would explain why my F-ing increases the likelihood of my satisfying one of my desires is a reason to F. But this is far too permissive, since many propositions may feature in such explanations whilst not being reasons to act. I shall now make these two objections in greater detail.

Some terminology: Schroeder uses "desire" to refer to the kind of psychological state, *whatever it is*, that plays a certain role in an example he uses throughout the book (p1). For simplicity, I shall instead use "desire" to refer to *some* particular kind of mental state, and will ignore the fact that it should play the correct role in his example. This does not substantially affect what I say below.

I

In chapter 2, Schroeder considers whether or not Humeanism is committed to an objectionably self-regarding account of practical deliberation. First, he defines the *deliberative constraint*: '[W]hen [an agent] is reasoning well, the kinds of thing about which he should be thinking are his reasons' (p26). Since Humeans apparently think that our desires

¹ Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions* (Oxford, 2007), ix + 224pp., £32.

are our reasons, the deliberative constraint implies that agents should deliberate over their desires. This, the objection goes, would at least sometimes be *objectionably self-regarding*. Schroeder has two things to say about this objection. They both hinge on recognising the *no background conditions assumption*. A background condition is something that is not itself a reason, but which does explain why some reason has the status of being a reason. Those who hold the no background conditions assumption think there are *no* background conditions on reasons. They believe that anything relevant to an agent's reasons must itself *be* (part of) a reason.

The first thing that Schroeder has to say is that *all* theories are at risk of objectionably self-regarding accounts of deliberation, not just Humean theories. Everyone agrees that *some* reasons will be determined by desires (in this very broad sense). Therefore, unless desires can be background conditions, *everyone* is committed to an objectionably self-regarding account of practical deliberation. So there is apparently a tension between the Humean view, the deliberative constraint, and the view that there are no background conditions on reasons. But “the role of the Humean Theory of Reasons in creating this tension is illusory” (p27). The real conflict is between the deliberative constraint and the no background conditions assumption.

Second, Schroeder does not think that hypotheticalism is committed to an objectionably self-regarding account of deliberation. Hypotheticalism rejects the view that there are no background conditions on reasons, and thereby solves the problem. Hypotheticalism takes desires to be background conditions on reasons: they *explain* why certain propositions get to be reasons (Chapter 2). So according to hypotheticalism, agents can deliberate over their reasons without having to deliberate in an objectionable manner over their desires.

I take both of these arguments of Schroeder's to succeed only because he sets the problem up incorrectly. In one respect, he has stated the problem too strongly. Everyone is committed to an objectionably self-regarding account of deliberation only if everyone agrees that in at least some cases where reasons are to be explained by desires (in the broad sense), it would be objectionable to deliberate over those desires. But why accept this? For example, it may be that the only reasons to be explained by desires, in the broad sense, are those explained by hedonic mental states, and that deliberation over such states is acceptable. There is nothing objectionable about deliberation that makes reference to, for example, how exhilarated the rollercoaster will make me feel. The suggestion that this is a problem for everyone gains force only by switching between cases where it is uncontroversial that the

reason in question is explained by a desire (Ronnie, p1,27), and cases where it is uncontroversial that deliberation over the desire in question would be objectionable (Ryan, p4,26-7). But it *is* controversial whether there are any cases with both of these features.

If deliberation over our desires is not necessarily objectionable, when *is* deliberation objectionably self-regarding? Call facts about oneself *personal facts*. Deliberation is objectionably self-regarding if the deliberator considers personal facts as having a marked difference in kind from non-personal facts, and does so merely because those facts are personal. One should not consider facts about oneself as special merely because they are facts about *oneself*. Deliberation should not require a kind of narcissism; a privileging of the self.

So when deliberating, the fact that I am in bad health should play the same sort of role as the fact that you are in bad health. It may be more important, or more often relevant, but it should not be treated as different in kind. Therefore, if non-Humeans take deliberation to treat personal facts as being of the same kind as non-personal facts, they are not committed to objectionably self-regarding accounts of deliberation. It follows that this is not a problem for at least some non-Humeans. If there is a tension between Humeanism, the deliberative constraint, and the no background conditions assumption, then the Humean theory must play a part in creating the tension.

My second objection is that in a different respect, Schroeder has stated the problem too weakly. The deliberative constraint is not that when deliberating, we must deliberate over, and only over, our reasons. The background conditions on our reasons are relevant to what reasons we have, and that must make it *at least* permissible to deliberate over them. So the deliberative constraint should really be the stronger claim that when deliberating, we *must* deliberate over our reasons *and may also* deliberate anything relevant to our reasons.

If we combine this with my revised account of objectionable deliberation, we can say that deliberation is objectionable if personal facts have a special place as our reasons *or as anything relevant to our reasons*. It follows quite straightforwardly from this stronger claim that hypotheticalism *does* commit us to an objectionably self-regarding account of deliberation. Hypotheticalists must claim that if we are deliberating over whether some fact is a reason or not, we should consider personal facts, and consider them as different in kind from non-personal facts. But we should not do any such thing, and so hypotheticalism must be false. The real tension *is* between Humeanism and the deliberative constraint.

In chapter 8, Schroeder considers the related worry that, unless agents deliberate over background conditions, they will be unable to know which reasons they have, and in turn, will be unable to act on their reasons. He responds by providing a more specific account of

desire that allows desires to play a role in the epistemology of reasons, allowing us to know which reasons we have without directly considering their background conditions. It might be thought that the truth of this account would undermine my stronger deliberative constraint. But it would not, because the most it can show is that agents do not *need* to directly deliberate over background conditions. This fails to conflict with my claim that agents *may* directly deliberate over background conditions.

So Schroeder's discussion of deliberation is incorrect in two respects. First, he thinks that everyone is potentially committed to an objectionably self-regarding account of deliberation. But this is false, since not everyone need accept that there are cases where our reasons are explained by desires that it would be objectionable to deliberate over. Second, he thinks that hypotheticalism is not committed to an objectionably self-regarding account of deliberation. But this is false, since this only follows if we should deliberate only over our reasons, and we should not accept this. Hypotheticalism implies that we may deliberate with special deference to *our* desires, and this *is* objectionably self-regarding. So, *pace* Schroeder, the problem here is one for all Humean views, and not for everyone else.

II

I now turn to my second objection to hypotheticalism. In chapter 6, Schroeder considers whether Humeanism can account for *agent-neutral* reasons, which he takes to be reasons for all agents. The worry is that if Humeanism is true, then each agent's reasons are dependent on their individual desires. That means that something can be a reason for all agents only if they all share certain desires. But agents' desires vary wildly, so according to Humeanism, agent-neutral reasons can exist only by chance.

Schroeder is keen to ensure that hypotheticalism can account for agent-neutral reasons, and thereby overcome this objection. His response is to weaken the relationship between desires and reasons so that 'agent-neutral reasons are *massively* overdetermined. They are reasons for anyone, no matter what she desires, simply because they can be explained by any (or virtually any) possible desire' (p109)².

How does hypotheticalism explain this fact? Consider the following claims:

² Hypotheticalism must also imply that agent-neutral reasons are equally weighty for everyone. Schroeder tries to show this in Chapter 7. I will not address this part of his view.

For all propositions r , agents x , and actions a , if r is a reason for x to do a , that is because there is some p such that x has a desire whose object is p , and the truth of r is part of what explains why x 's doing a promotes p . (p29)

X 's doing A promotes p just in case it increases the likelihood of p relative to some baseline. And the baseline, I suggest, is fixed by the likelihood of p conditional on X 's doing nothing – conditional on the status quo. (p113)

More simply, my reasons to F are those propositions whose truth helps explain why F-ing increases the likelihood of my satisfying a desire. I shall use this simpler formulation from here onwards.

It is crucial to note that the propositions that are reasons need not be *complete* explanations of why F-ing promotes one of my desires. They merely have to feature in an explanatory story *somewhere*. Without this assumption, each desire will account for very few reasons, and in turn hypotheticalism will be unable to account for agent-neutral reasons. Also note that the first quotation expresses a reductive account of what it is for a proposition to be a reason (Chapter 4). This matters for my purposes only because it implies that this condition is sufficient for a proposition to be a reason. Without this assumption, my argument below fails.

The above quoted claims together imply that each individual desire explains *many* reasons. *Any* proposition which is *any part* of what explains why F-ing *at all* increases the likelihood of my satisfying a desire is a reason for me to F. Schroeder does not show in great detail *exactly* how he expects agent-neutral reasons to follow from this account, though one can understand the optimism. To take a simple example, if I have a desire to get to work comfortably today, there are many propositions whose truth will increase the likelihood of my satisfying this desire. Assuming that there is some likelihood that it will rain, then the likelihood of my getting to work comfortably today is increased for every friend I have who might offer me a lift in their car. So according to hypotheticalism, that I want to get to work comfortably today entails that I have a reason to make friends with anyone who has any chance at all of being in a car in Reading today. In turn, since my chances of making friends are much lower if I am a murderer, hypotheticalism entails that I have reason not to murder anyone. So hypotheticalism implies that any arbitrary desire, such as to get to work comfortably today, can generate a reason to not murder people. Since everyone has some

such arbitrary desire, everyone has a reason not to murder anyone: the reason not to murder is agent-neutral.

But let us examine this more closely. According to hypotheticalism, *any* true proposition that is *any* part of what explains why my making friends increases the likelihood of my getting to work comfortably, is a reason for me to make friends. This will not only include the proposition that friends can give me a lift to work, but will also include propositions that play other parts in this explanation: that the inside of cars tend to stay dry in the rain, that I can get to work in a car, that cars move, that the government maintains a road between my house and my workplace, and so on. The truth of each of these propositions in part explains why I can increase the likelihood of my satisfying a desire by making friends. So hypotheticalism implies that *each of these things is a reason for me to make friends*. That is, it says that one thing to be said in favour of my making friends is that cars tend to stay dry in the rain. Another thing to be said in favour of my making friends is that my government maintains roads between my house and workplace. And so on. This cannot be correct. These may be background conditions on some of the reasons that I have for making friends, or, at best, *part* of a reason to make friends, but they are certainly not complete reasons in their own right. (Matters are *far, far* worse if we allow negative facts to feature in explanations. That cars generally do not contain mischievous rhinoceroses may help explain why getting in a car makes my trip to work comfortable, but this is not a reason for me to make friends.)

If we assume that normative reasons must be individually sufficient to explain why agents act, then the problem is worse still. If an agent has some reason to F, and no countervailing reasons at all, then we have a perfectly good explanation of why the agent F'd. So any normative reason should be by itself sufficient to render an action intelligible. That means that hypotheticalism implies that it should be at least conceivable that I could explain why I make friends by pointing out that my government maintains the road between my house and workplace. But this by itself could never explain why I make friends.

In brief, my objection is that hypotheticalism implies the existence of certain reasons which it seems do not exist. But Schroeder has a response to this. In Chapter 5, he assesses a similar worry: that Humeanism generates too many reasons because agents desire all sorts of silly things that we have no reason to bring about. Schroeder's response is to undermine our confidence in intuitions about the non-existence of reasons. He argues that many intuitions about the non-existence of reasons can be accounted for in terms of conversational pragmatics. Asserting the existence of a reason normally implies that it is not a weak reason, which wrongly inclines us to deny the existence of weak reasons. This might be thought to

undermine my argument, which also relies on intuitions about the non-existence of reasons. But his response only applies when a judgement of weight is part of the relevant intuition. Yet the objection I am raising is that hypotheticalism implies that certain propositions are reasons for actions when those propositions are not relevant in the right way for it to even make sense to assign them weights as reasons for those actions in the first place. Schroeder's arguments in chapter 5 do not really address my objection.

In summary, hypotheticalism accounts for agent-neutral reasons only by making it generate far too many reasons. Perhaps Schroeder can solve the problem by amending the claims I quoted above. Perhaps I am attacking the details of his view and not the core. But these permissive claims are absolutely central to his defence of hypotheticalism. It is only such lax requirements that allow hypotheticalism to account for agent-neutral reasons. The problem is to find some way to manoeuvre between these two objections. We must have a theory that generates enough reasons to ensure it accounts for agent-neutral reasons, but not so many that it accounts for absurd reasons. Hypotheticalism does not succeed in this task, and I am not convinced that any other form of Humeanism can either.

Conclusion

Let me briefly tie my two criticisms together. Humeanism is, broadly, the claim that all reasons are dependent on features of individual agents. Given this, it seems unlikely that Humeans can account for agent-neutral reasons without various implausible modifications to their view. But agent-neutral reasons are a central class of those reasons which are the subject matter of practical philosophy. The very point of normativity is that it often passes recommendations on what we want and do, and does so regardless of what we happen to be wanting and doing already. This is precisely why deliberation with special reference to oneself is so odd. Normativity is more impersonal than that.

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