

Weighing Reasons

Edited by Errol Lord and Barry Maguire

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Democratizing Humeanism

Kate Manne

Humean or, equivalently, desire-based theories of reasons say that the existence of any reason for action is explained by the existence of some suitable desire.^{1,2} Such views have come under serious attack during recent years. Some theorists have argued that desires in themselves never, or almost never, serve to justify or provide reasons for doing what it takes to achieve that desire's satisfaction (see, e.g., Scanlon 1998; Parfit 2011). And yet, as the sheer amount of energy devoted to arguing against desire-based theories of reasons might be thought to attest, these views nonetheless enjoy a certain lingering appeal. To some theorists, they appear to be our best or perhaps even our only hope of securing the supposedly tight connection between reasons and *motivations*. If one takes seriously the internalist position defended by Bernard Williams—to the effect that a reason for action must be capable of motivating the agent to whom the reason applies to act in accordance with said reason (1981b)—then a desire-based theory of reasons will naturally tend to beckon.³

But some theorists not persuaded by Williams' (notoriously obscure) argument for an internalist constraint on reasons, or who think that the internalist claim is simply false, have other grounds for going in a broadly Humean direction. Some theorists—undeterred by the current tendency in moral philosophy to

¹Thanks to Barry Maguire, Ruth Chang, and Daniel Star for very helpful comments and correspondence about this chapter.

²The kind of explanation at issue here is meant to be metaphysical, not epistemological. So the explanatory relation might ultimately be cashed out as identity, constitution, or grounding, for example.

³Here I have in mind what Mark Schroeder calls “the Classical Argument” for the Humean theory of reasons (2007, §1.2). But although, as Schroeder says, this argument is strongly associated with Williams' internalist position, it is not clear that Williams would have endorsed the argument, nor even that he was committed to a standard Humean view. For the internalist position, as Williams ultimately defined it, is only a *necessity* constraint on reasons, rather than a sufficiency claim and a claim about reasons' metaphysical “source.” See Schroeder and Finlay for discussion on this point (2012), and also my “Internalism about Reasons: Sad but True?” (2014).

regard acting on desires with a certain amount of alarm and suspicion—bravely maintain that wanting something surely *sometimes* provides a reason for going after it. And if one is subsequently expecting or hoping for a *unified* account of reasons, then a desire-based theory of reasons will naturally beckon too. This is the main initial motivation for going Humean offered by Mark Schroeder in his *Slaves of the Passions* (2007, §1.1), a landmark development and defense of a particularly sophisticated version of a desire-based or Humean view. And, as Schroeder goes on to point out, going Humean in this way may allow one to defend a form of *reductive naturalism* in metaethics—hardly an easy trick to pull off, and a central goal for many theorists. For if one takes all reasons to be explained by desires, and one regards the property of being a reason as the most basic or fundamental normative property, then one has the right kind of setup to pull the metaethical rabbit out of the proverbial hat (see Schroeder 2007, §4.4; §11.2). That is, one has the wherewithal to ultimately reduce all normative properties to the property of being desired, which is as good a candidate as any for being naturalistically acceptable—and is widely assumed to be so, within the relevant literature in metaethics.

Unfortunately, however, the rabbit often comes out of the hat looking pretty sickly. Desire-based theories of reasons tend to seem unduly scrawny in some ways and awfully bloated in others—as many desire-based theorists, including Schroeder, are quite prepared to concede as a central challenge for their view.⁴ To see this, consider the simplest possible version of a desire-based or Humean view:

Humean Theory of Reasons, Simplest Version: An agent A has a reason to V iff and because A has a desire which would be promoted by her V-ing.

This view would clearly suffer from two major extensional problems. First, some desires possessed by an agent A do not seem to correspond to reasons for A to act so as to achieve the object of that desire, intuitively speaking. Cruel and masochistic desires are the obvious examples here. Second, some reasons seem to exist in spite of there being no desire on A's part which would seem well-served by A's acting in accordance with said putative reason. On the face of it, an agent may be callous or imprudent, and have no desire whatsoever to do something which it nevertheless seems morally or prudentially incumbent on her to do. So the price of the simplest version of a desire-based theory of reasons would be an implausible and impoverished first-order normative theory regarding who should do what and when—and why, moreover.

These problems concerning extensional inadequacy might be tackled by developing a fancier desire-based view. But such theories also encounter objections to the very *form* of the explanation which they standardly give for an agent's

⁴See Schroeder's defense of his version of the Humean Theory of Reasons, Hypotheticalism, from the "too many reasons" objection and the "too few reasons" objection, respectively (2007, Chapters 5 and 6).

reasons. It has simply seemed implausible to many normative theorists that an agent's reasons all derive from her own desires—such that she could in principle learn all there was to know about her normative situation by determining what she wants, together with the non-normative facts which bear on how to get it. If we suppose, with many contemporary normative theorists, that reasons are the basis for sound practical deliberation, then the worry can be sharpened. For, as Schroeder argues at length, thinking about one's own desires during practical deliberation would often seem “objectionably self-regarding,” i.e., self-involved and self-centered (2007, §2.1). Schroeder in fact holds that considering the desires that suffice to explain one's reasons when deciding what to do would *always* be objectionably self-regarding, even when one is thinking about what to do for one's own sake (2007, §2.2). Whether or not one would want to go that far, as I myself would not (see also Sobel 2007), the Objectionably Self-Regarding worry is clearly a major objection to desire-based or Humean views. Thinking about one's own desires during deliberation would often seem objectionable, or at least beside the point, when it comes to figuring out what to do for the sake of others, or as an occupant of a particular social position. A person who saves his drowning wife with the thoughts “She's my wife!” and “I desire to save her!” may be charged with having one thought too many, to adapt Bernard Williams' famous jibe against the consequentialist (1981a). The latter thought in any case doesn't seem to *add* much to the husband's attempts to justify his behavior or explain why he should dive in with a special kind of alacrity. The former, social fact might seem to be reason—and thought—enough here.⁵

Important strategies for dealing with these and other objections to desire-based or Humean views have been pursued by Schroeder, Sharon Street (2009), Julia Markovits (2014), and David Sobel (forthcoming), among others. Other theorists, most notably Ruth Chang (2013), have instead explored the possibility of a *hybrid* theory of reasons, according to which only some reasons are based on an agent's own desires—or, on Chang's view, an agent's acts of *will*, more precisely—while other reasons are allowed to have an objective basis.⁶ In work in progress (Manne ms), I compare and contrast my own favored approach with that of these other theorists, according to some of the many theoretical

⁵And this would be so even if the wife was no longer, or indeed was never, in any danger. That is, even if the husband was reflecting after the fact or musing in the abstract—in an attempt to pass an examination in practical rationality, to borrow another of Williams' quips—his citing his desire to save his wife does not seem to add any points to his exam score.

⁶Note that the relevant acts of will count as being desires on a very broad, “direction of fit”-based conception of desires, which I'll go on to sketch here shortly. However, Chang herself distinguishes such acts of will from what she terms desires, with the former being active states, and the latter being more passive. Another point which should be noted is that Chang's subsequent category of “voluntarist,” will-based reasons are *constrained* although not determined by what we have objective reasons to do. So, on her picture, we have the power to create reasons by acts of will only when objective, “given” reasons run out.

desiderata which might be thought relevant here. But in this context, I am just going to give you the essence of the kind of desire-based theory of reasons which I have begun to find attractive, by showing how it avoids some of the above challenges, although it encounters certain others (over the course of section 1). And I will suggest strategies for dealing with some of these challenges by adopting a novel view about the *structure* of the desires that explain reasons (during section 2), and how such desires would naturally make normative claims on agents of varying degrees of importance—or, alternatively, strength or weight (in section 3, to close). My hope is that this last section may also provide some useful resources for thinking about reasons' strength or weight for friends of more standard Humean theories as well—who are my dialectical frenemies here, for reasons you'll see shortly.

1 Putting the “You” in Humeanism

One of the seldom questioned assumptions in the literature on desire-based theories of reasons is that any reason which belongs to some agent A must be based on desires which belong to A herself. This assumption is clearly partly an artifact of history. Williams' famous defense of an internalist position about reasons has loomed large in the literature (1981b), and might make it look like desires on the part of the agent must enjoy a privileged status in furnishing her with reasons. This turns out to be less obvious than one might initially have supposed, as I'll flag later on in passing. But, for the time being, I just want you to notice that if—like Sobel (2001) and Schroeder (2007, §1.2), in particular—you are not all that impressed by the internalist motivations for going Humean, then your theoretical options may be considerably broader at the outset. There is no longer any comparably obvious reason to restrict the desires which explain the existence of A's reasons to desires which belong to A, specifically.⁷

So suppose we were to allow that A's reasons can be provided by the desires of agents other than A, in addition to A herself. Indeed, there is no apparent reason to restrict the set of reason-providing desires to desires which belong to A and other agents like her; the desires of *subjects* who likely don't count as agents, such as human infants and certain non-human animals, may be included here as well.

⁷Admittedly, you might think that satisfying an internalist constraint on reasons would still be a potentially welcome automatic fringe benefit of any agent-centered Humean view. But this would be a mistake. Schroeder in particular is *not* a reasons internalist, despite being a Humean. Even though all reasons are explained by desires on Schroeder's Hypotheticalist view, and he also takes desires to be motivating states, desires will give rise to more reasons than they will typically motivate the agent to act upon, according to Hypotheticalism. For, according to Hypotheticalism, a desire on the part of an agent A will suffice to give rise to a reason for A to do *anything* which would make the desire likelier to be satisfied, as compared with A's doing nothing. And an agent may not be motivated to do what would only promote the satisfaction of some desire of hers in a very minor and/or circuitous fashion.

In view of this, the simplest version of the sort of more (as it were) “democratic,” desire-based view of reasons which I am envisaging would look something like this:

Democratic Humeanism, Take One: An agent A has a reason to V iff and because there is some subject S, who has a desire D, which would be promoted by A’s V-ing.

This kind of democratic, as opposed to agent-centered, desire-based theory of reasons might obviously be helpful when it comes to accommodating *moral* reasons to help others out, which seem intuitively capable of existing in spite of A’s callous or selfish indifference to what others want or need.⁸ (More on needs as a species of desire—with desires construed maximally broadly as mental states with a world-guiding “direction of fit”—over the course of the next two sections.) A democratic desire-based view would also obviously be a boon when it comes to the worry that Humean theories of reasons make an agent’s reasons—and hence, plausibly, what counts as sound practical deliberation for her—objectionably self-regarding, i.e., excessively mired in facts about herself and what she wants.

But, like the simplest version of the agent-centered desire-based theory of reasons, the simplest version of a democratic desire-based theory of reasons would encounter serious problems. For along with the rain comes a veritable downpour. An agent might seem to have far too many reasons now, and too little which differentiates her normative situation from the normative situation of anybody else (in a position to bring about the same outcomes, at any rate, under an “ought implies can”-style assumption applied to reasons, *mutatis mutandis*). Agent-centered desire-based theories of reasons have difficulty accommodating the reasons that we plausibly share with every other agent. (See, in particular, Schroeder 2014, Introduction.) But they tend to be well-placed to accommodate the reasons which seem to belong to a particular agent A, in view of A’s individual and idiosyncratic desires. A democratic desire-based theory of reasons will tend to have the opposite set of characteristics and corresponding problems. In particular, such views run the risk of eliding the reasons that intuitively count as being *agent-relative*.⁹

To see this, take Schroeder’s opening example in *Slaves*, where Ronnie has a desire to dance, whereas Bradley can’t stand it. Then Ronnie plausibly has a reason

⁸Note that Schroeder would agree with this. He wants to vindicate the universality of apparent reasons like the reason for Ryan to help Katie to get what she needs. Indeed, Schroeder even wants to vindicate the (to my mind, non-obvious) claim that everybody’s reason to help Katie is equally strong (2007, p. 106). This is why he allows an agent’s desires to generate a plethora of reasons (see the previous note), and goes on to endorse a non-standard, recursive account of reasons’ strength or weight. More on this issue shortly.

⁹I say “intuitively” because technically this worry doesn’t really get off the ground. All reasons are relative twice over on this picture—relative to a particular agent, as well as to a particular subject. That is, all reasons are reasons *for* an agent A to do something *for* the sake of some subject S, whose desire somehow explains the existence of this reason. Even so, the worry clearly persists at an intuitive level, as the following example will bring out.

to go to a party where there will be dancing, whereas Bradley has no such reason, at least for all that has been said (2007, p. 1). But, on the simplest version of a democratic, desire-based theory of reasons, it might seem that *Bradley* has a reason to get Ronnie to go to the party now, and see to it that Ronnie dance, even if the two happen to be perfect strangers to one another. This implication might seem at least a bit surprising. And it also seems theoretically important to be able to draw a contrast between the reasons which we share with every other agent—or at least every other agent who is in a position to *act* on this reason—and the reasons which are in some sense more personal and particular.

This worry may be ameliorated to some extent initially by observing that there is often a real limit as to how much an agent *can* do to promote an arbitrary desire on the part of an arbitrary subject. There are many desires which involve wanting to achieve something by dint of our own activity, or to enjoy the fruits of our own labor. This is obviously true when it comes to what Williams called “personal projects” (1981a). And it is also often important to people to be able to fulfill certain, more basic desires on their own, or with a little help from their friends, rather than having to rely on the kindness of strangers.

There are also many desires where we want something from somebody in particular—e.g., that they do, think, or feel something *with* us or for us, and that they do so in a certain spirit, moreover. Iris Murdoch wrote in her novel, *The Black Prince*, that the “the absolute yearning of one human body for another particular one and its indifference to substitutes is one of life’s major mysteries” (1975, p. 316). One might doubt that it is such a mystery or that it has to be just one body. Nevertheless, when it comes to desires which are internal to a personal relationship, there is often a strict limit as to how much outside parties can do to promote them. As Thomas Nagel has observed (and in a similar context, as it happens) “attempts at positive assistance will [sometimes] constitute objectionable interference, if the activity is one in which autonomy, spontaneity, and originality are important. People who are painting, or writing poetry, or making love, will usually be ungrateful for assistance” (1970, p. 129). This is true.

Nagel goes on to claim, immediately thereafter, that “it is evident that when such activities are governed by reasons . . . [this] will not yield an immediate requirement of concern for the goals someone else has reason to pursue” (1970, p. 129). But it is not clear that Nagel’s claim holds with as much generality as might reasonably be hoped here. For even if the means to some end are ones to which the subject happens to be *averse*, this does not prevent a theory of reasons from predicting the existence of a reason for me to promote this end of hers, even if it is likely to be a reason which is subsequently overridden by countervailing reasons not to do so. The point that there are cases in which the subject wants to engage in some activity or enjoy the attentions of another purely for its own sake, i.e., as part of the very end in question, only goes so far then. And there are many other cases in which it seems doubtful that an arbitrary agent would have a reason to help me to pursue some of my various ends, even if they *are* in a perfectly good position

to do so. It would be nice to at least have room to restrict the range of agents who have a reason to feed me grapes, for example, even if it is not intrinsic to my desire that I convey them to my own mouth. There are hence grounds for looking for a more general and flexible explanation as to why others often seem to have no reason whatsoever to act in service of my ends—and vice versa, mercifully.

2 What Do You Want from Me?

One way to make some progress on this problem is to restrict the desires which explain the existence of reasons to desires which are relative to *agents* as well as subjects, in a way which mirrors the structure of reasons, on a democratic, desire-based view. Just as any reason for action is held to be a reason for a particular agent to do something *for* a particular subject, in service of one of the subject's ends, so we may say that the kinds of desires which explain the existence of these reasons are desires on the part of the subject that some agent do something *for* her (again, in service of one of her ends). So Democratic Humeanism would become something more like this then:

Democratic Humeanism, Take Two: An agent A has a reason to V iff and because there is some subject S, who is willing for A to V to promote one of S's ends, E.¹⁰

Desires with this structure might naturally be called "*claims*" or "*calls for action*" on the part of a subject. And they may be made on specific agents, or some more or less open-ended set of agents (more on this shortly). In the special case in which the subject and the agent are actually one and the same, such that the subject effectively calls on *herself* as an agent to perform a certain action in pursuit of one of her ends, the relevant mental states would be something like intentions (or "partial" intentions, perhaps better, since they can conflict and compete with others). This seems to me, at any rate, to be a natural first-pass suggestion.

Thinking about such claims or calls for action as an especially normatively important species of desire, with intentions being the first-personal analogue of second-personal claims on others, fits well with the classic example of psychological states with a world-*guiding* direction of fit, rather than a world-*guided* one. (So the idea that these agent-relative desires are candidates for explaining reasons within a Humean framework should not be too controversial.) In G. E. M. Anscombe's famous case (1957), which she used to illustrate this contrast (albeit not under this description), a detective is following a shopper around a grocery store.

¹⁰Note that it might now seem particularly important to rule out desires based on false beliefs about the effective means to some end. For a partial solution to this problem, which avoids sheer stipulation, see *n.* 21. Also note that the subjects' ends will have to be restricted to *intrinsic*, and also plausibly *self-regarding*, desires, in order to avoid standard double-counting worries.

Both parties will end up with identical lists in hand if neither makes a mistake. But the two have very different tasks and subsequent relations to their respective lists. The shopper's list directs him to buy various items, of course; whereas, the detective's list reflects his impression that the shopper has put certain items in his basket. (The idea being that the detective is keeping tabs on the shopper's every move. Is that the extra-large jug of arsenic he is buying? Best make a note of it.)

The detective's list serves as a model of the direction of fit *beliefs* have, insofar as it is supposed to fit the world, or accurately reflect the way things are. It hence has the appropriate form to serve as the *basis* for a belief on the part of the detective, and perhaps other inquirers too. But how does the shopper's list figure in the analogy? Anscombe remarks that the list might well be the product of the shopper's own desires or intentions. But what is often missed about the example, and is useful to notice in this context, is that Anscombe holds that the list could equally well have been written by the shopper's *wife*. And Anscombe writes that:

It is clear that the relation of this list to the things he actually buys is one and the same whether his wife gave him the list or it is his own list; and that there is a different relation where a list is made by a detective following him about. If he made the list himself, it was an expression of intention; if his wife gave it to him, it has the role of an order. (1957, p. 56)

Or, as we might prefer to say instead, in a somewhat more low-key fashion, the shopper's wife has *asked* for or requested that her husband buy various items, e.g., some butter. Hence Anscombe's ensuing remark that if the husband returned home with margarine instead, then regardless of who wrote the list, "The mistake is not in the list but in the man's performance." And "If his wife were to say: 'Look, it says butter and you have bought margarine,' he would hardly reply: 'What a mistake! We must put that right' and alter the word on the list to 'margarine.'" (1957, p. 56) Correctly *believing* that it's not butter is not enough to rectify the error, in other words.

One lesson of this is that classifying claims on *oneself* as merely a special case of the general category of claims which are made on agents to do something (in order to achieve a certain end) turns out to tally well with the classic discussion of mental states with a world-guiding direction of fit. And if one is accustomed to using the notion of direction of fit to distinguish desire-like or conative from belief-like or cognitive mental states, then one should countenance an interesting and seemingly under-noticed possibility. Even if desires must be in *a* head, they need not be in *your* head, in order to ask something of *you* (or another agent, *mutatis mutandis*). And this would in turn serve to mitigate the extent to which we stand to lose the special connection between reasons and motivations by turning to a democratic desire-based view of reasons, instead of an agent-centered one. For the relevant class of desires (whether they are voiced or silent, and whether one notices them or not) continues to comprise a kind of psychological state which implicitly *asks* something of you, in your capacity as an agent, or which directs you to change the world to fit a mind. Claims

or calls for action which are made on an agent hence still involve a kind of question (“Will you?”) which may naturally be answered by her subsequent motivation or willingness to do what is being asked of her—regardless, at least in principle, of who is doing the asking.¹¹

Explaining reasons in terms of desires of this agent-relative kind, i.e., to do something which the subject is *willing* for the agent to do in service of one of her ends, has several theoretical benefits for the Democratic Humean theorist. For one thing, and most importantly in this context, this will obviously allow us to do justice to the fact that different agents’ reasons often seem to be very different. Subjects do not want just anything they happen to want from just anyone, in general. In many cases, particularly where adult human beings are concerned, subjects are highly selective as to how they are willing for their ends to be pursued—and by whom, moreover. The shopper’s wife wants some butter, and this end of hers gives rise to a call for action on her husband to pick some up at the shops. A stranger’s turning up on their doorstep bearing butter might well be so strange as to be entirely unwelcome. So although this gesture could still result in the wife’s end of obtaining some butter coming to fruition, it may not be a *means* to her end which she is willing to countenance. There would then be no reason for every Tom, Dick, and Harry to turn up bearing Plugra, by the lights of Democratic Humeanism, Take Two. Nor would there be any reason to give her stolen butter if she is conscientious; nor humble Land O’Lakes if she is a food snob, and so on.

Of course, it is natural to worry that explaining reasons in terms of agent-relative desires will obviate the existence of the reasons which we *do* plausibly share with other (suitably positioned) agents. So there is a worry about throwing the baby out with the bathwater here. But I think that there may be sufficient room to accommodate these reasons even yet, once we recognize that there are plausibly certain potential states of bodily and psychic distress on the part of any subject, such that it is difficult if not impossible for them to avoid effectively crying out for help—from somebody, anybody, nobody in particular. Picture a person who is struggling for breath, or suffering from other comparably acute forms of distress, e.g., intense pain, panic, thirst, or the sense of being trapped, say. Such a subject will typically be none too picky about the agents whose assistance would come as a relief to him. Indeed, he may not be even so much as *capable* of being genuinely indifferent to such assistance when he is in such a state (although he may be averse

¹¹Moreover, although reasons for an agent to do something for some subject will not plausibly *guarantee* the existence of a motivation on the part of the agent on whom the claim is being made, there is arguably nothing all that puzzling about the idea that this motivation might arise for an agent under suitable conditions. For there is (I suggest) nothing all that puzzling about being motivated to do something which is (implicitly or explicitly) being asked of one, when the social circumstances are conducive to optimal responsiveness. So if the internalist constraint on reasons is construed as broadly as it sometimes is—e.g., to say that reasons must be *capable* of motivating agents, under some kind of idealized conditions—then it may actually be met by a democratic, desire-based view, as well as an agent-centered one (see Manne, ms, for further discussion).

to it as well, and hence genuinely ambivalent about some agent's playing hero). Elsewhere, I discuss this view in connection with (so-called) adaptive preferences and the idea of certain forms of pain as involving or perhaps even being what I call *bodily imperatives*—specifically, “make-it-stop” states (Manne, ms). Metaphorically, these can be envisaged as a kind of involuntary howling at the moon on the part of a vulnerable, embodied, suffering, sentient subject. A person in this position may wish that he could suffer in silence, and be to some extent successful in managing to bite his tongue. But his body will continue to writhe in protest, despite himself.

These are the sorts of states which will be held on this picture to give rise to reasons for any and every agent (or, again, any and every agent in an appropriate position) to do what they can to alleviate or, alternatively, prevent subjects from experiencing such states of intense distress.¹² There may be stronger reasons for every agent *not* to do so as well, or stronger reasons for every agent to do something else instead. But given these claims about the more or less irrevocable, largely uncontrollable tendency to reach out for certain basic forms of relief, it will fall out of a democratic desire-based view that certain reasons are more or less non-negotiable and apply to any and every agent (modulo, again, suitable “ought implies can” provisions). And it is intuitively plausible to think that these reasons are indeed among those which are non-negotiable and universally valid. They derive not from absolute, objective, or univocal moral facts. Rather, they derive from myriad different voices calling or crying out, and hence contingent but thus far largely changeless facts about what embodied creatures need, and cannot stand to suffer.

If we allow that the desires which explain the existence of reasons for action have precisely the same structure as them—such that reasons and desires are held to be *both* agent- and subject-relative, and such that the corresponding predicates will have the same number and type of argument places—then a further important theoretical benefit would naturally accrue. Namely, we can say that desires *just are* reasons, and that the latter are *fully* explained by the former, moreover. Reasons effectively ask some agent to do something for some subject, in service of one of her ends. Precisely the same may be said of the desires they consist in. There are hence no further questions to be raised on this view about the reasons for action which a particular desire gives rise to. (In this respect, the democratic view is markedly unlike Schroeder's Hypotheticalism; see *n. 7*.) The only questions which remain will be about when, and if so to what extent, such actual claims have genuine normative significance, importance, strength, or *weight*. This strikes me as being metaphysically elegant and helping to keep us honest. Of course, it also creates a pressing need for a plausible and natural theory about the weight of such

¹²Assuming that complications to do with time can be handled appropriately. Considering any of these issues (some of them both tricky and controversial) would take me too far afield for present purposes. But ultimately, I would certainly want to try to take advantage of the possibility of holding that desires can provide reasons across *times* as well as across persons (compare Nagel 1970).

reasons. This is the issue to which I now turn, and which will concern me for the remainder of the chapter.

3 Keeping it in Proportion

Return now to the case of Ronnie, who wants to dance, and Bradley, who does not want to. Just because there is *room* for Ronnie to have little or no desire that Bradley—a perfect stranger to Ronnie, we're supposing—escort him to the party and encourage him to get his groove on obviously doesn't *guarantee* that this desire will be absent. Perhaps Ronnie is an incorrigibly egocentric character who wants any and every agent to help him to satisfy his every wish and whim. Or perhaps Ronnie has developed a strange fixation on Bradley, having picked his name out of the phone book, or knowing him only by reputation. Ronnie is nevertheless hoping that Bradley will act as a kind of life coach to him, helping him to get out of the house and cut a rug more often. How do we explain the fact that Bradley's reason to do what Ronnie wants here would ordinarily seem to be pretty weak at best?

One thought that I find intuitively compelling in this connection is that such a desire on Ronnie's part would often seem quite frivolous and somehow superficial. This is not to say that it isn't intensely felt and/or demanded loudly. But it is difficult to imagine that much *hangs* on Ronnie's getting what he wants here—other than whether Ronnie will be pleased or sulky with Bradley in the aftermath. Indeed, in normal contexts, we would tend to expect that this desire would only be intensely felt and/or demanded loudly because Ronnie's more basic desires—or, as we may then prefer to say, *needs*—are being satisfied at present. Ronnie's unmet yen to have Bradley patiently coax him into going to parties and dancing the night away has something of the smell of a first world problem, colloquially.¹³

How might we develop this kind of intuition into an appropriate account of reasons' strength or weight, on a democratic desire-based view? How should such an account be developed, more generally? Without pretending to have definitive answers to either of these questions, let me sketch what I take to be an attractive possibility.

As Schroeder has pointed out, it is commonly assumed that desire-based theories of reasons are committed to what he calls:

Proportionalism, according to which a reason for an agent A to V is proportional in strength to:

- (1) The strength of the *desire* which explains the existence of this reason; and
- (2) The strength of the *promotion* relation between the desire and A's V-ing.

¹³Again, in normal contexts. And if Ronnie really does need Bradley's help in this endeavor, then my own intuitions about the strength of Bradley's reason to help Ronnie in this way would tend to shift accordingly.

I am considerably more sympathetic to Proportionalism than Schroeder is.¹⁴ Still, I think we need to be careful as to how we cash it out. To begin with, I think the notion of the strength of a desire tends to be ambiguous between a desire which has an unusual degree of *intensity*, in terms of its “nagging” or driving quality within a subject’s psychic economy, versus a desire which tends to take *priority* over other of her desires. Suppose that a subject S is at risk of losing everything, in the sense of having *none* of her (current) desires satisfied, not even the most basic ones. When a genie now appears and grants S *n* wishes, where *n* remains unknown to S, what would be the order in which S would cast her wishes, all else being equal? Desires can be thought of as having a higher or lower priority insofar as the subject would wish for their object sooner rather than later (or, alternatively, be indifferent to their ordering) in this kind of situation.¹⁵

I think that this (admittedly rough) “priority” conception of the strength of a desire is the more promising candidate modifier with regard to the strength of the reason which it gives rise to than its felt intensity, or demanding quality, at any particular point in time. For people often require that certain of their basic needs be met in order to be able to so much as experience these needs properly. When a person is freezing or starving to death, their sense of being cold or hungry will often tend to wane. The more urgent their bodily need for shelter or food becomes, the less they may be capable of being in touch with their state of deprivation. A person’s capacity to experience much of anything will often diminish as their body shuts down, towards the very end.¹⁶

But although the intensity of certain desires and aversions may actually become weaker as the person’s bodily plight becomes more dire, the salience of other of their ends will typically diminish still more. It is well-documented that people who are chronically hungry or malnourished (or subject to “food insecurity,” a particularly awful euphemism) will often become positively obsessed with food.¹⁷ Other desires which used to be on their minds frequently will tend to become less salient. The subject may not have the energy to long for higher

¹⁴See Schroeder (2007, Chapter 7) for an entirely different, recursive account of reasons’ weight. But I think it is fair to say that many theorists worry that his proposal, ingenious as it is, may not be a natural fit with a Humean theory of reasons (see, e.g., Sobel 2007 and Enoch 2011). There is much to say about these issues, and I can’t hope to do them justice here. But my goal in this paper has been the more modest one of exploring potential benefits of the kind of Democratic Humeanism which I tend to find attractive. One such is that it may be able to preserve a version of the Proportionalism which Schroeder moves to reject, but which arguably continues to be the default view for Humean theories of reasons.

¹⁵And not merely arbitrarily, as when she is indifferent between which desire is satisfied next, and simply picks at random.

¹⁶People who are suffering from frostbite sometimes die because their bodies actually begin to feel warmer; so they cease trying to keep warm. There is something particularly cruel about this deception, which routinely costs homeless people their lives in cold climates.

¹⁷Compare the famous Minnesota Starvation Experiment, conducted in the 1940s, where many people living on around a thousand calories a day became preoccupied with food. Some people sat around sadly and futilely reading recipe books.

pleasures or the motivation to seek them out, as she would have done otherwise. So she may no longer actively desire to dance, for example. All the more so with needs which come on suddenly and are typically experienced as the most pressing. If someone is struggling to breathe, and cannot get a full lungful of air, then his standing desire to dance or engage in other means of creative self-expression will naturally tend to recede into the background for the moment.

To make the idea of a subject's priorities a little more precise here, we first need a suitably general definition of a desire's *depth* or (as I will use the terms, equivalently) *fundamentality*. I propose the following:

The Depth of Desire: A subject S's end, E1, is deeper or more fundamental than another of S's ends, E2, if S would only issue a claim on any agent (including herself) in service of achieving E2 when E1 had been achieved, all else being equal—e.g., E1 and E2 are equally likely to come about, by equally acceptable means, by equally well-positioned agents, who are equally well-disposed towards S.

Obviously this clause may not give rise to anything like a linear ordering of the subjects' various ends, in terms of their relative priority. And the psychology here will often be rather messy, as well as variable and contested. But I think that the notion of the relative depth of a subject's various ends is nonetheless useful to represent the idea of an individual subject's priorities in life.¹⁸ And, in view of this, we can now make the following intermediate claim, which I take to be quite plausible:

Intrapersonal Depth Comparisons: When it comes to comparisons of an *intrapersonal* nature, the strength of the two reasons for an agent A to V1 and V2 in service of E1 and E2 (respectively) on behalf of some subject, S, will be *proportional* to the relative depth or fundamentality of E1 and E2.

This is effectively to let the subject's own priorities dictate the appropriate priorities for the agent who is acting on her behalf (again, all else being equal).

What about *interpersonal* comparisons on the basis of the relative depth or fundamentality of different subjects' ends? In particular, may we use this notion of depth to compare the strength of two *different* subjects' claims upon a single agent to perform two different, and possibly incompatible, or at least competing, actions? Not directly, no. The two different subjects' lists of priorities may be "compressed" to different degrees; that is, one subject may have more "levels" or "rungs" of ends than the other (to continue on with the metaphor). We need be able to *norm* the relevant scales before such interpersonal comparisons will make sense. Fortunately, it's not difficult to see how to do so. Namely, we can calculate:

The Depth of Desire Coefficient: Suppose that an individual subject S has a list of priorities with n different levels, ranked in increasing order of depth

¹⁸Cf. the psychologist Abraham Maslow's famous notion of a human "hierarchy of needs."

or fundamentality. Suppose too that S has some end, E , whose depth or fundamentality is f (where $f \leq n$). Then dividing f by n (f/n) will yield *the depth of desire coefficient* for S 's end E , which will be a rational number between 0 (non-inclusively) and 1 (inclusively).

As calling it a “coefficient” is meant to suggest, we should think about multiplying the number which would otherwise represent the strength of a reason for an agent A to V in service of a subject S 's end E —i.e., according to other measures, of which more shortly—by the depth of desire coefficient, as defined above. Accordingly, ends that are comparatively deep or fundamental in this sense will give rise to reasons which are comparatively weighty or strong. Conversely, ends which are comparatively shallow or superficial will be comparatively lacking in weight or importance, in terms of the reasons they give rise to. Ronnie's peculiar end of having a stranger regularly take him dancing might be intensely felt and/or a strong motivator. But this end is also very unlikely to be *deep*, if Ronnie is a relatively normal human subject.¹⁹ In view of this, there are likely to be far better uses of Bradley's limited time. And if Bradley is a relatively normal human subject himself, then his own ends would also figure into the calculation. He will plausibly have a more fundamental desire, or even need, not to be at a perfect stranger's every beck and call all of a sudden.²⁰

So that takes care of what I take to be an appropriate analogue of the first of the two defining commitments of Proportionalism, for a democratic desire-based theory of reasons. I now turn to consider the second of these commitments, which says that the strength of a reason is also somehow proportional to the strength of the *promotion* relation between the action and the desire which explains the reason to perform it.

¹⁹Compare Rawls's famous example of a man who wanted only to count blades of grass. Does he really want this more than having certain of his basic physical needs met? Is counting blades of grass really his only or top priority? If not, then this desire would end up generating a reason for us to help him which would be comparatively weak, according to this view (assuming that he even wanted our assistance to begin with). Thanks to Mark Schroeder for originally getting me to think about how to address this sort of challenge as a Democratic Humean theorist—and for helpful correspondence about this project more generally.

²⁰There remains the possibility of allowing the intensity of a desire to be a tiebreaker, however, all else being equal. Although I want to leave this possibility officially open, I am not convinced of the need for it. The fact that my preference for vanilla over chocolate ice cream gives rise to a stronger reason to have the vanilla can be accommodated by the clause above, given that I would choose the former over the latter, all else being equal. And I am not sure that any residual psychologically nagging quality, or motivational “oomph,” of said desire could plausibly be held to have any normative importance. Consider the familiar experience of sitting down at a restaurant, and ordering the salmon over the risotto, knowing that you will enjoy the salmon more. But for some reason, the risotto (which you never enjoy that much) is also calling your name tonight. Does the psychologically nagging quality of your desire for the risotto bolster the reason to order it? I am not sure that it does. And I am not sure that the sheer intensity of a desire alone bolsters the strength of the reason which it gives rise to in general.

We can begin here with the natural enough thought that the strength of a reason for an agent A to V ought to be proportional, on any desire-based view, to the extent to which A's V-ing would be:

- (a) *efficacious*; and
- (b) *necessary*, in order to satisfy the desire which explains the existence of this reason.

That is, the strength of a reason will depend upon (a) whether the relevant action would be an effective means to the relevant end (or simply constitute its achievement, in the limit case); and (b) whether the agent's acting in this way is particularly useful or even vital, in order that the relevant end ever be achieved.

There is now an important question about how appropriate scales and measurements for (a) and (b) might be conceptualized and combined, in order to produce an overall promotion relation coefficient. There are a number of possibilities here, as you will shortly see. But let me sketch what I take to be the most natural of these, and at the same time gather together the various different threads here.

Consider the reason for an agent A to V, in accordance with subject S's desire D, in service of achieving S's end E (as per *Democratic Humeanism, Take Two*). According to the form of Proportionalism I've been developing, the strength of this reason will be proportional to:

- (1) The depth or fundamentality of E in S's psychic economy, as captured by the *depth of desire coefficient* for E, as per the foregoing definition; and
- (2) (a) *The efficacy*, as well as (b) *the necessity*, of A's V-ing in order to achieve E—as captured by the *promotion relation coefficient*, as spelled out in the definition which follows.

In order to think about (a) and (b) more precisely, here is a natural way of picturing the relevant measurement scales:

(2a) *The efficacy scale*

The question: how likely is it that E will come to fruition, conditional on A's V-ing?

0 ----- 1
 Not a chance Dead cert

(2b) *The necessity scale*

The question: how likely is it that E *won't* come to fruition, conditional on A's *not* V-ing?

0 ----- 1
 No worries—it'll happen regardless This is it—it's the only way!

Now, for the reason for agent A to V in service of S's end E, we can calculate the promotion relation coefficient as follows:

The Promotion Relation Coefficient: By multiplying the measures of likelihood in (2a) and (2b), we obtain the *promotion relation coefficient* for A's V-ing with respect to S's end E, which will be a real number between 0 and 1 (inclusively).

So, on this view, the fact that some action would have no chance of panning out, in terms of achieving the relevant end, means that there would be no reason whatsoever for an agent to perform it (or, if you prefer, it would be a reason with no weight). Similarly, there will be no reason (or, again, a reason with no weight) to perform an action in service of some end which is guaranteed to come to fruition regardless.²¹ For if an end is bound to come to fruition regardless, then the probability that this end will *not* be achieved, conditional on the agent's not performing this action, would of course be zero. The action in question would hence be unnecessary.

These strike me as being the right results, intuitively speaking. As does the thought (also captured by the promotion relation coefficient clause) that, if an agent's performing some action represents the only road to Rome in achieving a certain end, then the agent's reason to perform this action is as strong as it can be, in the necessity dimension. Similarly, if an agent's performing some action would be guaranteed to achieve some end which is harbored by some subject, then her reason to perform this action is as strong as it can be, in the efficacy dimension.

Nobody, least of all me, would actually expect the math here to be feasible in practice. But these clauses may nevertheless be instructive to clarify the relevant conceptual and theoretical issues. Overall, the account of reasons' weight which I have laid out in this section suggests that one aspect of good deliberation will involve performing a kind of mental balancing act which feels intuitively close to the one that we often in fact perform—and which it seems right upon reflection that we perform in many cases. When I can pour my energies as an agent into answering any number of seemingly worthwhile claims on me, then I should invest my energies where I can make a contribution that is likeliest to be effective, as a means to the relevant end, and where there is also a comparatively high risk of failure if I *don't* get involved, all else being equal. I should balance considerations regarding my degree of *leverage* with considerations regarding the degree to which it is vital that I do this *now*, in order that this end have any hope of ever being achieved. And I should also try to respond to as many subjects as possible, and to promote the ends which they hold dearest—again, all else being equal. Metaphorically speaking, others' claims on me will exert more of a normative "pull" as the relevant ends

²¹Note that these clauses would hence prevent at least some desires which are based on ignorance—e.g., false beliefs and/or faulty reasoning—giving rise to reasons; specifically, in the case where they result in the subject wanting an agent to perform some action which would be completely inefficacious and/or unnecessary in order to achieve the relevant end.

go deeper within the subject's psychic economy. In certain ways, I should think of myself as one agent among others, trying to do my bit—i.e., to pull my weight, to contribute, to be “part of the solution”—while treating myself in a way which makes the whole enterprise sustainable. On the other hand, and as was discussed in section 1, I will often be more or less uniquely well-placed to pursue my own personal projects, as well as attending to certain of the desires of my intimate relations. And other human subjects will have very many ends which they do not *want* my help with, and which I will hence have no reason to promote on their behalf, according to the form of Democratic Humeanism I've sketched in this chapter. That there is much more to be said here presumably goes without saying.²² But this seems to me to be a promising place to start in thinking about my reasons as explained by desires which belong not just to me, but to everyone who has them.²³

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²²Whether or not one thinks that one should also accord extra weight to oneself and one's intimate relations, and whether or not one ought to discount claims which ask others' claims to be *frustrated* or *ignored*, will be especially important issues here. I am sympathetic to affirmative answers to both of these questions. I consider how to formulate and defend the latter answer in work in progress (Manne, ms).

²³In the end, I have to confess—I am not a big believer in reasons at all, let alone the idea that reasons come “first” (whatever that means, exactly). And I remain an ambivalent reductive naturalist, partly because the notion of a desire might be thought inextricably bound up with the project of sympathetically interpreting other people and creatures, a task which I suspect can only be properly characterized in irreducibly moral terms—e.g., in terms of a certain kind of moral sensibility. But I do believe in the project of identifying moral claims on agents with certain *actual* claims—e.g., claims of the body, others' desires and needs, as well as the social norms which are conducive to everyone's claims being satisfied. So consider this a modest, terminologically concessive way station on the long road to defending a more radically anti-rationalist view in metaethics (which I think would come closer to the views of the later Hume, i.e., in the second *Enquiry*, as it happens).

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