Foundationalism and Practical Reason

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In this paper, I argue that Humean theories of moral motivation appear preferable to Kantian approaches only if one assumes a broadly foundationalist conception of rational justification. Like foundationalist approaches to justification generally, Humean psychology aims to counter the regress-of-justification argument by positing a set of ultimate regress-stoppers—in this case, unmotivated desires. If the need for regress-stoppers of this type in the realm of practical deliberation is accepted, desires do indeed appear to be the most likely candidate. But if this foundationalist strategy is rejected, there is no longer any reason to suppose that all motivation must be traceable to some extra-rational incentive. This clears the way for a rehabilitation of the Kantian claim that reasons for action can take the form of categorical imperatives. To illustrate this thesis, I show how a conception of practical rationality that incorporates a contextualist model of justification can be developed that treats social norms as reasons for action, without assigning any mediating role to agent desires. A theory of action of this type eliminates the gap between moral obligation and action, and so articulates the fundamental Kantian intuition that acting on the basis of moral principle—and with disregard for self-interest—is just one way of acting rationally.

One of the least satisfactory features of the recent debate in moral psychology between proponents of Humean and Kantian models of motivation has been that a number of significant underlying assumptions about the nature of rational justification have remained unthematized. A significant methodological feature of Kant's analysis of practical reason is that it involves an explicit *prior* commitment to a particular conception of theoretical (or epistemic) rationality. This ensures that, in his analysis, any significant assumptions about the nature of theoretical reason are rendered explicit in the analysis of practical reason. Unfortunately, in the recent controversy there has been a tendency simply to assume that a satisfactory account of theoretical rationality is in place, and then to proceed to debate the various strategies for extending it into the practical realm.

The problem with this state of affairs, I will argue, is that the conception of rational justification that is widely presupposed is a rather unsophisticated form of foundationalism.[1] This foundationalism, in turn, generates a strong presumption in favour of the Humean view. Naturally, this is not to say that the Humean conception of practical reason *follows from* a foundationalist conception of justification (far from it, since most Kantians are

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[1] Specifically, the type of foundationalism that Michael Williams calls "substantive foundationalism" (1991, pp. 114–6).

foundationalists as well). Instead what it shows is that the arguments that provide the most powerful motivation for the Humean view presuppose the correctness of a broadly foundationalist conception of justification (and that in so far as Kantians share this foundationalism, they assume an unnecessarily heavy burden of proof).

However, the problem is not just that these foundationalist presuppositions lend support to the Humean view. The Humean theory of motivation is often thought to involve a form of scepticism about practical reason.[2] In this paper, I will argue that this scepticism is not actually a direct consequence of the formal model of motivation associated with the Humean view, but arises only when this model is combined with a foundationalist conception of justification. While the role of foundationalist arguments in generating *content scepticism*, i.e. scepticism about our ability to make well-grounded moral judgements, has received some attention, the role of foundationalism in generating *motivational scepticism*, i.e. scepticism about the ability of reason to direct our actions, has been entirely ignored.[3] This is a state of affairs that I hope to correct, so that even if convinced Humeans remains unmoved, they will at least be clearer about where the sceptical implications of their view are coming from.

In the first two sections, I outline what many Humeans have taken to be the most powerful argument for their view—the so-called "teleological" argument. I then show, following Wallace (1990), that this argument only favors a Humean conception of rational action when supplemented by an additional constraint on practical deliberation—the "desire-in desire-out" thesis. In §3, I argue that this constraint only generates traditional Humean scepticism about practical reason under the assumption that rational justification has a foundationalist structure. This is because the non-cognitive conception of desire at the heart of the Humean view is motivated by the foundationalist strategy of responding to the epistemic regress argument by positing a set of "unmoved movers". In §4, I attempt to show that the adoption of a contextualist response to the regress argument not only eliminates the primary motivation for adopting a Humean view, but also undermines the standard grounds for doubting that reasons for action can take the form of categorical imperatives. I conclude by attempting to outline some of the ways in which the adoption of a contextualist conception of practical rationality creates the possibility of a more satisfactory articulation of certain basic Kantian intuitions about the nature of moral action.

[2] In the sense intended by Korsgaard (1986b).

[3] This distinction is from Korsgaard (1986b, p. 5). On the relationship between theories of justification and content scepticism, see various papers in Sinnott-Armstrong and Timmons (1996).

1. The teleological argument

Recent contributions to the debate over practical reason have created a substantial sharpening of the issues involved (B. Williams, 1981; Korsgaard, 1986b; Smith, 1987b; Wallace, 1990). The basic question is whether human action can be *directed* by reason, or merely *guided*. To be guided by reason means that at some general level the agent's goals are given antecedently, and reason serves only to promote the most effective realization of these goals. This is usually stated in terms of a belief-desire model of action. Reason determines beliefs, the agent calculates how best to satisfy his desires in light of these beliefs, then acts. The influence of reason on action is indirect in that it operates only through our beliefs, and instrumental in that it assists us only in the determination of means for our given ends. An alternate way of stating this position is simply to say that there is no such thing as a specifically practical form of rationality. The instrumental conception of practical rationality just is theoretical rationality employed in practical contexts. This is why this Humean position is often thought to involve a form of scepticism about practical reason.

The Kantian (or rationalist) view maintains that reason plays a more direct role in determining our conduct. Asking "what should I do?" is a different *type* of question from asking "what should I believe?". It therefore requires a different type of response, backed by a different type of justification. The rationality of an action is therefore distinct from the rationality of a belief in a way that precludes the reduction of the former to the latter. In this view, what one believes will be determined by what one has reason to believe, just as what one does will be determined by what one has reason to do. Classically, the Kantian cashes this out in terms of a belief-will-desire model of action, where the will expresses the constraint of reason upon impulse.[4]

The question underlying this debate is whether moral obligations that take a categorical form can provide good reasons for action. A "categorical" obligation here is to be understood as one that prescribes an action directly, without making essential reference to an agent's goals or interests. The standard Humean view is that an obligation of this type cannot provide a good reason for action, but must be converted into a statement that in some way connects up the prescribed action with the agent's motivational states. While this debate concerns the type of reasons that can figure in an agent's practical deliberations, the Humean attempts to establish

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[4] This is not to claim that Humeans have no place for the will. It is just that they do not take it as primitive. The core literature on second-order desires can be read as an attempt to build up a concept of the will using only elements that are available within the Humean framework. See Frankfurt (1988).

this conclusion by shifting the topic slightly. Instead of addressing the *ex ante* question of how we decide what to do, i.e. the structure of practical deliberation, she switches to the *ex post* question of what we are willing to accept as an explanation of the action after it is performed.

This redirection of the debate highlights one of the many complexities in the role that "reasons for action" play in our everyday discourse about action. On the one hand, reasons for action play a central role in our practical deliberations. Asking ourselves the question "What should I do?", we consider a variety of reasons for and against a particular course of action, eventually settling upon some decisive set. However, after we have performed the action, and faced with the question "Why did you do that?", we can appeal to these same deliberative considerations in order to explain our action. While explanations can also cite factors that were not explicitly entertained (like subconscious motives), under standard circumstances any effective deliberative consideration can later be employed as an explanation. The type of explanation that relies upon effective deliberative considerations is often referred to as a *rationalizing explanation of action* (Wallace 1990, p. 364).

What Humeans have observed is that if all deliberative reasons can be used as explanatory reasons, then any limitation on the range of elements that can be included in the latter set operates simultaneously as a limitation on the former. The Humean strategy is thus to argue that because the only possible explanations for action are *instrumental*, deliberation must also be instrumental in form, i.e. there can be no specifically practical form of rationality. Thus the Humean starts out with an a priori constraint on what can count as a good explanation for action, then translates this into a constraint on what sorts of considerations the agent can entertain.

The most powerful formulation of this claim is the so-called teleological argument. Although it was given its first clear formulation by Michael Smith in "The Humean Theory of Motivation" (1987b), it can be found lurking in the background of much previous work, including Bernard Williams's much-discussed "Internal and External Reasons" (1981). It runs something like this:

(1)   Intentional action is explained[5] teleologically, in terms of the goal that the agent intends to bring about.

(2)   A rationalizing explanation of this type must be framed in terms of some *goal-directed psychological state* of the agent's.

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[5] It should be noted that "explained" is to be understood in a weak sense, since this argument is neutral between causal and non-causal theories of action. See Smith (1994, pp. 102–4).

(3) *Beliefs* are psychological states that aim to represent the world, and thus do not qualify as goal-directed. (The direction of fit is word-to-world, rather than world-to-word.)

(4) *Desires* are goal-directed psychological states. (The direction of fit is world-to-word.)

(5) Therefore intentional explanation cannot be framed strictly in terms of belief.

(6) Therefore intentional explanation can be framed in terms of desires (or beliefs and desires).

Since teleological explanation is constitutive of our understanding of social life in general, this argument has enormous intuitive appeal. But it is also very slippery, and can be made to appear to demonstrate much more than it actually does. Consider the following argument, which attempts to use the teleological argument to derive a sceptical conclusion: The teleological argument shows that beliefs alone are not enough to motivate our action: a desire for the anticipated outcome is also required. So no matter what an agent believes, if he does not have the requisite desire, he will not act. So you can argue until you are blue in the face trying to get him to do what you want; unless you can show how it conduces to the satisfaction of his desires, you will not be able to get him to do it.[6]

What makes this argument appear reasonable is a somewhat subtle equivocation in the use of the term "desire".[7] What is noteworthy about the teleological argument is the extremely formal concept of desire that it invokes. In the same paper in which he presents the argument, Smith says that since "all that there is to being a desire is being a state with the appropriate direction of fit, it follows that having a goal just *is* desiring" (1987b, p. 54). This amounts to treating statement (4) as a definition. On the other hand, there is a substantive conception of desire that sees it as a non-cognitive state, along the lines of hunger and thirst. In this substantive sense, beliefs and desires map onto what psychologists usually refer to as cognition and affect. The rhetorical trick in the argument above involves an unflagged shift from the formal to the substantive interpretation of the term "desire". There is an intuitive sense in which an agent cannot be argued into experiencing a given affect, but we have so far been given no reason to think that an agent could not be argued into adopting a particular goal-directed psychological state.

This is a point that Kantians have not failed to note. They have responded to the teleological argument by claiming that it shows the Humean position to be either vacuous or false. It is easy to generate a dilemma along these lines. Statement (6) is not actually a strong enough

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[6] This is the kind of argument given by B. Williams (1981, pp. 106–8 and 122).

[7] Cohon (1986) has diagnosed a similar equivocation in B. Williams (1981).

conclusion to defeat the Kantian, since it does not state that all teleological explanations *must* include a desire. What is needed is something more like:

(6′)   Intentional explanation can only be framed in terms of desires (or beliefs and desires).

This reformulation highlights the fact that the original (6) does not have sufficient generality. But in attempting to establish this more general conclusion on the basis of statements (1)–(5), the Humean is forced into a difficult position. She can achieve the required generality by taking (4) to be a definition, but then the concept of desire becomes so formal as to lack any direct non-cognitivist implications. (In fact, one could just as easily use the term "maxim" instead of desire, in which case Kant's own moral action theory would satisfy the teleological argument.[8]) Alternately, she can retain a substantive, non-cognitivist conception of desire, and achieve generality through an empirical claim to the effect that all goal-directed states are desires. Unfortunately, she thereby shoulders a massive burden of proof, since she must present an empirical defense of an *in principle* claim, to which the Kantian need only produce a single counterexample. The dilemma can be summarized as follows: depending on how you treat the concept of desire, the Humean can have either generality without non-cognitivism, or non-cognitivism without generality.

Since the second horn of this dilemma looks quite hopeless, Humeans have been inclined to work on the first. By sticking with the formal concept of desire, the generality of the argument is preserved, i.e. we are guaranteed that there is not some *other* goal-directed psychological state that could serve as the basis for action. The trick then is to beef up this formal conception somehow to show that any goal-directed psychological state must be, at some important level, non-cognitive. Humeans have attempted to do so by focusing on the method of derivation of desires. Here the position that is important from the Humean perspective is what Wallace (1990, p. 370) refers to as the *desire-in desire-out* thesis.

2. *The desire-in desire-out thesis*

Nagel distinguishes between what he calls motivated and unmotivated desires (1970, p. 29). No matter what the specific theory of action involved, not every desire can be taken as primitive (since this would

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[8] In order to avoid the appearance of persuasive definition, some Humeans have opted for Davidson's term "pro-attitude" rather than desire, even though this is hardly a more neutral expression.

result in the attribution of an infinite set of motivational dispositions to the agent). Similarly, some explanation must be given of what happens when agents acquire new desires. The obvious solution is to claim that new desires are derived systematically from old ones. Desires can then be split into two classes, the unmotivated ones, which are taken to be original existences, and the motivated ones, which are derived from the unmotivated ones.

For the Humean, practical deliberation basically amounts to this method of derivation. The central mechanism involves the creation of a new desire via belief, e.g. I have a sugar craving, I believe that chocolate is sweet, I have a craving for chocolate. It is also sometimes thought possible to derive a new desire from imaginatively varying or recombining old ones (B. Williams 1981, p. 105). There is considerable latitude here. What makes the position distinctively Humean is the claim that all practical deliberation must take existing desires as its point of departure. Any process that produces a desire as output must have another desire as input (hence the expression desire-in desire-out).[9] Since this process just is *the* process of rational deliberation, the primitive desires could not have been produced by deliberation, and so must be given non-rationally. An adequate defense of the desire-in desire-out thesis might therefore "beef up" the formal conception of desire enough to give the general version of the teleological argument sceptical implications.

According to Wallace, this analysis results in an important redirection of the debate:

> The significance of the distinction between motivated and unmotivated desires is that it sharpens our conception of the debate between the Humean and the rationalist. Interpreting this distinction as I have done, we see that the real burden on the Humean is to defend a claim about the rationalizing explanation of desires, the claim I have called the desire-in desire-out principle. It is because the teleological argument by itself lends no support to this crucial principle that it fails to settle the issue between the Humean and the rationalist. (1990, p. 371)

Smith believes that the desire-in desire-out thesis can be established through simple iteration of his version of the teleological argument (1987b, p. 59).[10] After the first application, in which an action is explained

[9] Nagel notices this: "Although it will no doubt be generally admitted that some desires are motivated, the issue is whether another desire always lies behind the motivated one, or whether sometimes the motivation of the initial desire involves no reference to another, unmotivated desire" (1970, p. 29).

[10] Interestingly, Smith drops this iteration defense of the desire-in desire-out thesis in the rewrite of the paper that appears in (1994). Unfortunately, he continues to refer to "underived" desires, even though he no longer has an argument to show that such things exist.

in terms of a desire (or belief and desire), an attempt is made to explain this desire. Since this desire is also a goal-directed psychological state, it must be explained in terms of a further goal-directed state, and so on. The suggestion is then that this "chain of explanations must eventually terminate in an unmotivated desire" (Wallace 1990, p. 374). Countering this Humean claim are two rationalist arguments that appear to exhaust the logical space of counterproposals: first, it has been suggested that a desire could be derived directly from a belief; second, that a desire could be established originally through some direct process of ratiocination. These two positions, which Smith (1987a) refers to as belief-rationalism and desire-rationalism, can be identified in very general terms with suggestions made respectively by Wallace and Korsgaard. Both attempt to achieve their goal by blocking the iteration of the teleological argument.

In Wallace's view, there is no reason to think that beliefs alone cannot motivate desires.[11] In particular, he argues that an evaluative belief, i.e. x is good, can give rise to a corresponding desire to bring about state x. (Nagel argues similarly that "prudential" reasoning requires that we treat an agent's belief that, in the future, she will desire x, as grounds for acting to bring about x now.) This amounts to a *belief-in desire-out* model of practical deliberation. In this case, the attribution of a desire to the agent is pure formalism, since "the reasons for the belief may be considered reasons for acquiring the desire as well" (Wallace 1990, p. 365). We can retain the attribution of a desire in our explanation, but in the presence of evaluative or prudential beliefs it serves only as an extra gear.

Korsgaard's rejection of the desire-in desire-out model of practical deliberation is more orthodoxly Kantian, in that she accepts the belief-desire distinction, but argues that both beliefs and desires can be established directly through processes of ratiocination. Using the formal concept of desire, this position amounts to claiming that desires can be motivated by either unmotivated desires, or by principles derived through purely cognitive processes. To switch this into more familiar Kantian language, we can define maxims as the basic goal-directed psychological states, and take desire in its usual substantive sense. Now we can say that the maxim upon which the agent acts can be determined either by a desire, or by reason. The specifically Kantian claim is that practical deliberation takes not only the form *desire-in maxim-out*, but also allows for maxims "whose content shows them to be ultimately justified" (Korsgaard 1986b, p. 23). In the first case, practical reasoning transforms the desire into a maxim by selecting a hypothetical imperative that matches the desired outcome with an appropriate action. In the second, practical reasoning is

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[11] It is not clear that Wallace actually holds this view. He develops it as a plausible rationalist response to the desire-in desire-out thesis.

simply a test procedure that checks to see if a given maxim satisfies the categorical imperative.

In one way or the other, both Wallace and Korsgaard challenge the Humean desire-in desire-out thesis, Wallace by arguing that the input can be a belief, and Korsgaard by claiming that it can be an ultimate principle. While both create problems for the Humean, their objections are also, I will argue, fundamentally misguided. Both authors accept that an adequate defense of the desire-in desire-out thesis would constitute a defense of the traditional, sceptical Humean view. I would like to suggest that the desire-in desire-out thesis, like the teleological argument, is a distraction. Taken by itself, the desire-in desire-out thesis has no sceptical implications, and can be readily accepted by the Kantian. It is only when *combined with a foundationalist conception of justification* that it issues in sceptical conclusions. Because Wallace and Korsgaard both share this tacit foundationalism, both feel the need to reject the desire-in desire-out thesis. In so doing, they overlook the real source of the Humean's scepticism—which does not come from the concept of desire in play, but rather from the underlying conception of rational justification.

3. Foundationalism

Foundationalism is a general epistemological thesis about the structure of justification. The doctrine is usually adopted as a strategy for responding to the so-called "epistemic regress problem", which threatens to show there can be no such thing as a well-justified belief. Suppose that some agent *a* holds a belief that *p*. In order to determine whether *a* is justified in holding this belief, we might ask her to provide us with the reasons for which she believes that *p*. (Naturally, what we are interested in here is not merely a psychological account of how the agent came to believe that *p*, but rather what other beliefs the agent has that might justify *p*. Furthermore, since we are interested in knowing whether *the agent in question* is justified in believing that *p*, not whether *p* is justifiable in general, the beliefs in question must be ones that are effective in motivating the agent's adherence to *p*. We are therefore seeking a *rationalizing explanation* of her belief that *p*.)

It appears, however, that the agent will be unable, *in principle*, to provide a satisfactory response to this request. If she presents some new belief, *q*, as grounds for believing that *p*, then she succeeds only in deferring the problem. In order for *q* to serve as good grounds for *p*, there must in turn be some grounds for believing that *q*. However, when asked to explain what grounds she has for believing *q*, the agent is faced with a tri-

lemma. If she continues with the strategy of introducing a new belief, this time as grounds for *q*, then she has clearly embarked on an infinite regress. But the only other options appear to be to circle back upon some belief that has already been mentioned, or else simply cease to provide further reasons. Since neither of the three options presents a course of action that is capable of redeeming the claim that the belief is justified, it appears that the agent cannot have any justified beliefs.

The foundationalist strategy for responding to this argument involves two major points of agreement with the sceptic (Alston 1989, p. 54). First, the foundationalist agrees that infinite chains of justification are unacceptable, and that it is either false or pointless to ascribe an infinite chain of supporting beliefs to an agent. Second, the foundationalist agrees with the sceptic that circular reasoning is unacceptable, and that in so far as the agent's belief system is rational, it does not exhibit a circular structure. As a result, the foundationalist take the third horn of the trilemma, and accepts that rationalizing explanations do at some point simply run out.

Where the foundationalist disagrees with the sceptic is over the significance of the last point. He argues that the agent can be justified in holding certain beliefs by virtue of some property that they possess, other than their inferential dependence upon other beliefs. For instance, certain beliefs might be intrinsically justified by virtue of their content, or causally connected to an empirical state of affairs, or known through some quality of the subject's experience. Thus the foundationalist divides an agent's beliefs into two types, those that are are justified inferentially, and those that are known directly. The latter are often referred to as "basic beliefs". The regress argument does not threaten the claim that the agent has justified beliefs, so long as her inferential beliefs occur in justificatory chains that terminate with some set of basic beliefs.

In this view, the regress argument is important because it tells us something about the structure of the agent's belief system. Since the sceptical conclusion is manifestly unacceptable, what the regress argument shows is that every rational belief must, in the end, be justified by some basic belief that is itself not capable of further justification. This means that any rationalizing explanation of a belief must at some point end with a basic belief which provides, in some sense, the "ultimate" explanation for an agent's holding the other beliefs in the associated inferential chain.

With this analysis in hand, we can now turn our attention back to the Humean account of practical reason. The most noticeable point is that the standard Humean argument for positing unmotivated desires relies upon a form of regress argument that bears considerable similarity to the epistemic regress argument. In order to determine whether agent *a* has a good reason to perform action *p*, we must ask her for a rationalizing expla-

nation. According to the teleological argument, this will take the form of a desire for *p*. If we inquire further into why the agent desires *p*, then according to the desire-in desire out thesis, the rationalizing explanation must cite some further desire as the grounds for *p*, e.g. a desire for *q* (and perhaps a belief that *p* will satisfy *q*). However, in order for the desire for *q* to serve as a good reason for *p*, there must in turn be some reason for desiring *q*. The same trilemma appears: either an infinite chain of rationalizing desires must be advanced, or the chain of reasons must circle back upon itself, or it must simply end with a desire that is not subject to further rationalizing explanation.

This practical version of the epistemic regress argument suggests the radically sceptical conclusion that agents never have any good reasons for action, i.e. that we are in a sort of motivational limbo. The Humean account of practical reason can be seen as one particular way of cutting short the regress and avoiding the radically sceptical conclusion. The Humean posits a set of unmotivated desires that serve as the ultimate motivators, the "unmoved movers" of the practical realm. Thus Hume argues that certain desires—the passions—are just given, as a constitutional feature of the human organism. That the introduction of these ultimate desires is motivated by the regress argument is quite explicit in Hume:

> It appears evident that the ultimate ends of human actions can never, in any case, be accounted for by *reason*, but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependence on the intellectual faculties. Ask a man why he uses exercise; he will answer, *because he desires to keep his health*. If you then enquire, *why he desires health*, he will readily reply, *because sickness is painful*. If you push your enquiries farther, and desire a reason *why he hates pain*, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to any other object. (1777, p. 293 [244])

This passage shows quite clearly that, for Hume, the existence of "ultimate ends" is not an empirical discovery about human psychology. Ultimate ends are a theoretical posit required by the foundationalist strategy for responding to the regress argument.

While this view avoids the radically sceptical conclusion, it nevertheless results in a certain form of non-cognitivism about motivation. A parallel exists between the role of the impressions in the production of belief and of the passions in the production of desires. In both cases, because these basic attitudes are not inferentially based, there is no possibility that an agent's view can be changed through argument. In the case of impressions, this is not such a problem. Because of their representational nature (word-to-world direction of fit), they are capable of truth or falsity, and

can be expected to command convergence. This makes them rational. With the passions, on the other hand, which have the opposite direction of fit, there is no sense in which they can be correct or incorrect. This makes them, from the point of view of reason, arbitrary.

Now certainly not all Humeans agree with Hume's identification of unmotivated desires with "the passions".[12] However, those that seek to derive sceptical conclusions about the power of reason in the direction of human affairs still commonly rely upon the regress argument in order to establish the conclusion that each agent's actions are in the end motivated by a core set of desires that are themselves not the product of deliberation, and hence not open to rational revision.[13]

The important point is that the scepticism in the Humean view, to the extent that it is sceptical, does not come from the teleological argument, and does not come from the desire-in desire-out thesis. It comes from the foundationalist strategy of responding to the regress argument by positing unmoved movers, or desires that are not subject to rational revision. This is why someone like Donald Davidson, for instance, who subscribes to a belief-desire model of action, and accepts the desire-in desire-out thesis, is not a Humean, or in any case not a sceptic about practical reason.[14]

At the same time, it is not just Humean sceptics who avail themselves of the foundationalist strategy for responding to the regress argument. In fact, the contemporary debate over practical reason is structured by an acceptance on all sides of the basic foundationalist strategy. Both Wallace's and Korsgaard's positions, as outlined above, can be interpreted as alternative ways of cutting short the same regress. Wallace suggests that the rationalizing explanation of desires can terminate with an evaluative belief. This would set up a second regress, this time of belief, leading to the standard moral realist contention that evaluative beliefs are in the end derived from basic moral facts about the world. Korsgaard, on the other hand, suggests that the regress can end with a set of "ultimate values", or

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[12] For instance, Smith distances himself from what he calls "the phenomenological conception of desire" (1994, pp. 104–11).

[13] Thus, according to B. Williams, when arguing morality with an agent who does not already possess the right motives, the only "glue" that we have to stick the moral ought to the agent "is social and psychological" (1981, p. 122).

[14] This how I interpret Davidson's claim that the principle of charity requires that we treat each other as knowers of the truth, and *lovers of the good*. Of course, not all foundationalists claim that basic beliefs are unrevisable, and so it is not an automatic consequence of the Humean strategy that unmotivated desires must be immune to revision. However, a Humean theory based on a weaker version of foundationalism of this type would no longer have the sort of non-cognitivist implications that have traditionally been the source of scepticism about practical reason.

maxims/desires that are given by reason alone. Her line of reasoning is quite explicit:

> Justification, like explanation, seems to give rise to an infinite regress: for any reason offered, we can always ask why. If complete justification of an end is to be possible, something must bring this regress to a stop; there must be something about which it is impossible or unnecessary to ask why. This will be something unconditionally good. Since what is unconditionally good will serve as the condition of the value of other good things, it will be the source of value. Practical reason, then, has the noninstrumental task of establishing what is unconditionally good. (1986a, p. 488)[15]

This style of argument is surprisingly pervasive. Nagel employs the same line of reasoning to establish the need to ground practical reasoning in a metaphysical "interpretation" of agency that transcends any particular justification:

> For if we justify a requirement, it is in terms of a principle from which that requirement follows, perhaps with the aid of further conditions. But that principle must itself represent a requirement, or else what it is adduced to justify will not be one. Therefore any requirement which we set out to justify will not be ultimate. Something beyond justification is required. (1970, p. 4)

This is why I am not suggesting that the Humean conception of practical reason follows from a foundationalist response to the practical regress problem. Instead, I want to argue that this pervasive foundationalism generates a strong presumption in favour of the Humean view, because the other candidates for "unmoved movers" are not very appealing. In fact, I have considerable sympathy for those who, faced with the rationalist options of metaphysics, moral realism or ultimate principles, opt for the Humean view. But this is surely a false dilemma. Objective values for the realist, ultimate principles for Korsgaard, and unmotivated desires for the Humean, are all *theoretical posits*. The theory that necessitates them is the same theory that requires us to posit basic beliefs in epistemology. If we reject the theory that necessitates them, then we simply avoid the dilemma.

I mention this because outside the context of debates in moral philosophy, foundationalism is regarded as a deeply troubled philosophical doctrine. The problem stems mainly from a widespread inability to make any sense out of the idea of a basic belief. The literature here is too vast to summarize in any helpful way.[16] But since the regress argument appears

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[15] This regress argument also structures much of the discussion in Korsgaard (1996).

[16] See M. Williams (1977), Sellars (1963), Rorty (1979).

to force us to posit an entity that, from any other theoretical perspective, is incoherent, it is unsurprising that many have seen fit to reconsider the value of this argument. A recent resurgence of interest in coherentist and contextualist models of justification stems directly from the perceived failure of the foundationalist project.

The Humean conception of unmotivated desires can be saddled with many of the same problems as basic beliefs. Most of these stem from the fact that desires, like beliefs, are propositional attitudes, and thus essentially interpretation-dependent. So in the same way that theorists have objected to the claim that a fact could be theory-neutral, many have claimed that desires are not culturally neutral, but rely essentially upon the vocabulary in terms of which they are expressed (Taylor 1985). Similarly, the fact that both beliefs and desires are propositional attitudes makes it difficult to suppose that they are directly based on phenomenal states. Sellars's (1963) critique of the "Myth of the Given" applies just as well to desires as it does to beliefs. Finally, in the same way that phenomenological accounts of perception suggest that the subject is actively involved in the genesis of all belief, psychodynamic models of action maintain that all desire is the product of active motivational cathexis on the part of the subject. These sorts of considerations have led many theorists to question the suitability of desires for the role of ultimate regress-stoppers.

Given that these issues remain enormously controversial, it is obvious that the regress argument is doing all the work for the Humean, transforming the doctrine of unmotivated desires from an adventuresome piece of speculative psychology into a widely accepted philosophical truism.[17] But if the basic foundationalist strategy is misguided, and if general scepticism is unacceptable, then we are forced to find some other way around the regress argument. And if this is the case, then the current debate over practical reason, which persists in assuming a straightforward response to this argument, must be seriously off track.

4. Practical reason without foundations

In order to make this claim less abstract, I would like to outline an account of practical reasoning that could be developed using a no-foundations view of justification. My objective will be to show how the use of a differ-

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[17] Naturally, there are versions of the Humean view that modulate their dependence upon the regress argument. The point is that all of these views are both complex and controversial, and do not have the kind of intuitive appeal possessed by the traditional Humean account.

ent strategy for responding to the regress argument opens up new possibilities for an account of practical reason.

One of the characteristics of traditional foundationalism is that it infers, based on the structure imposed on belief systems by the regress argument, that there are fixed relations of epistemic dependence among our propositional attitudes. In particular, our beliefs are divided into two classes, those that are directly justified, and those that are not. The contextualist, on the other hand, while accepting the need for terminating judgements to end inferential chains, does not accept the idea that the beliefs that serve this role form any sort of "natural epistemological kind". Thus contextualist theories retain the basic foundationalist structure of justification, but argue that different beliefs (in principle any belief) can play the role of regress-stopper, depending upon the context.

In this view, justification ends when beliefs are reached that are taken-for-granted in the context of inquiry. In the case of rationalizing explanations of belief, this means that explanation ends when a set of beliefs is reached that is unproblematic for the purposes at hand. This does not mean that they are immune to revision. In other contexts, they can be thematized, questioned and confirmed or rejected. As Michael Williams, the most influential proponent of this view, has put it:

> Consider Wittgenstein's remark that "My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it". Entered in the right setting, a claim to have two hands might function like a foundationalist's basic statement, providing a stopping place for requests for evidence or justification … But in other circumstances *the very same claim* might be contestable and so might stand in need of evidential support. The content of what is claimed does not guarantee a claim some particular epistemic standing. (1991, pp. 117–8)[18]

Naturally, the contextualist is here shifting attention away from what may or may not go on "in the agent's head", toward the agent's capacity publicly to justify this belief to others. This is motivated by a certain anti-realism about the epistemic relations among belief-states. We can think of the contextualist as imposing a sort of use-constraint on the attribution of epistemic properties.[19] In this view, our talk about the inferential relations among beliefs must be interpreted as an indirect way of discussing the agent's capacity to construct arguments using the relevant propositions. All of this is motivated by a set of broader philosophical concerns that cannot be dealt with here (see M. Williams, 1991, pp. 89–135). What is relevant for our purposes is the extent to which the adoption of a contex-

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[18] Wittgenstein citation from (1969, p. 33 [§250]).

[19] For this "manifestation argument" against realism, see Wright (1993a).

tualist strategy for responding to the regress argument would restructure the debate over practical reason.

The most significant consequence is that, with a contextualist view, there is no longer any impetus to divide up desires into those that are motivated and those that are unmotivated. This breaks the image of an agent walking around with a "subjective motivational set", or some finite batch of unmotivated desires, that then branch out to supply specific motives in particular situations. In the contextualist view, when we construct a rationalizing explanation of an action, the type of desire that we are willing to accept as the "ultimate" explanation of the agent's act will depend upon the pragmatic context in which the inquiry is conducted, i.e. what kind of explanation we are looking for, and why we want it. In the same way, the agent may employ a variety of different considerations in deciding what to do, depending upon which features of the interaction context appear salient.

This view of justification, I will argue, is an attractive one for those of broadly Kantian sympathies. This is because a model of this type undermines the standard arguments that purport to show that all categorical imperatives can be reduced to hypothetical ones. For the Humean, hypothetical imperatives do not appear to generate a regress of justification. Assuming that desires are simply given, and that some account of theoretical reason is in place, the ultimate justification for a hypothetical imperative will be a statement that isolates the causal connection between an action contemplated and the outcome desired. Categorical imperatives, on the other hand, appear to get stuck in a practical regress. For each statement that expresses a moral obligation, we need some further explanation of why we should respect that obligation. As long as the reason given takes the form of another moral obligation, this process can go on and on. Since there are no ultimate values, the only place at which this regress could terminate is in an unmotivated desire. And so the Humean concludes that all categorical imperatives must in the end be backed by hypothetical ones.

Most Kantians have responded here by simply biting the bullet and positing ultimate principles (although none of the candidates, up to and including Kant's, have been particularly compelling). But for those who do not find this move acceptable, a contextualist model of justification offers an agreeable way out of the pinch. By denying the force of the regress argument, contextualism undermines the reduction of categorical to hypothetical imperatives, without requiring ultimate sources of value. This offers us an opportunity to rehabilitate the notion of a categorical imperative, even if not in the specific sense in which Kant intended it. To

see how this would work, consider the following proposal, which I will call Kantian revisionism.

One point at which the issue of categorical imperatives often arises in the literature concerns the status of what Mackie refers to as "institutional reasons" for action (Mackie 1977). It is an especially conspicuous feature of everyday social interaction that we often explain our actions through straightforward appeal to the social norms that govern our practices: e.g. Q. Why did you leave money on the table?—A. As a tip for the waiter; Q. Why are we standing here?—A. This is the back of the line; Q. Why did you apologize?—A. I stepped on his toe; and so on. In each of these cases, the agent explains the action, not by citing a substantive desire or interest, but by appealing to a social norm. What many philosophers of Humean temperament have found unsettling about these social norms is their apparently categorical form. The norms that prescribe tipping, queueing, apologizing, etc., seem to have the form "do *x*", not "if you want *y*, do *x*".

In real life, institutional reasons are usually regarded as providing a perfectly reasonable sort of explanation for action. In fact, we would consider it quite odd for someone to say, following Mackie, "I know you are supposed to tip, buy why did you really do it?". But in much of moral philosophy, this entire category of justifications has traditionally been dismissed, on the grounds that they do not provide "ultimate" justifications. According to Mackie, each institutional reason is a reason only for those who accept that institution (1977, p. 79). But, he asks, pushing back the regress in a now-familiar way, what is the reason for the institution? Since only objective values or desires could provide this ultimate justification, and since he regards the former as "ontologically queer", he concludes that some prudential motive must be lurking in the background of all norm-conformity. Even though institutional norms appear to take a categorical form, they must in fact harbor a hypothetical imperative somewhere in the chain of supporting reasons (1977, pp. 27–30).

A contextualist model of justification suggests that institutional reasons be taken at face value. Since all ordered social interaction takes place in broadly institutional contexts, social norms will be available to provide a shared background against which actions can be explained. Each of these reasons may be perfectly adequate in its context. To push any of them further would really be to inaugurate a new context, with a different set of taken-for-granteds. This is not to say that institutions are simply given, just that in any particular ordered social interaction, *some* institutional context will be given, and this will provide a background for both practical deliberation and rationalizing explanation.

Let us suppose, following Gibbard (1990), that there is an intentional state called "accepting a norm". Here an analogy with speech acts is help-

ful. Our beliefs are often characterized as a set of judgments, and judgment is often thought of as an internal version of assertion. But there is no reason to think that only assertion is capable of internalization. We might think of doubts, for instance, as internal questions. Similarly, we can think of "accepting a norm" as the issuing of a self-directed imperative. We can then define an agent's *principles* as a set of imperatives of this type. Naturally, since the direction of fit of imperatives is world-to-word, principles will be a type of maxim (in the generic sense of a goal-directed psychological state).

For practical purposes, we might want to distinguish between two types of maxim: desires and principles. When asked to explain an action, the agent can appeal to either a principle or desire, depending upon the sense of the question. The main difference between the two types of reasons will be that principles, because they appeal to shared norms, offer forms of deliberation that take as their point of departure a set of shared public reasons for action, while desires offer only private reasons. These two forms of deliberation correspond to the two types of rational action that Kant identified, since principled reasons for action will take the form of categorical imperatives (directly prescribing particular actions), while desire-based reasons will take the form of hypothetical imperatives (prescribing actions as means to the attainment of particular outcomes).

This sort of revisionist Kantian rational action theory is in many ways quite disarming. Its contextualism undermines the standard device for reducing categorical imperatives to hypothetical ones. Similarly, by dispensing with the idea of ultimately valid principles, it freely expands the class of categorical imperatives to include all social norms, not just explicitly moral ones.[20] It also eliminates a traditional awkwardness in the Kantian view. Rather than identifying a rational decision-making process with substantive characteristics like universality or impartiality, it retains the familiar identification of rationality with straightforward *justifiability*. Thus the core conception of rationality remains invariant throughout the accounts of theoretical and practical reason.

5. An objection

It might be objected that this suggestion eliminates the most crucial component of the Kantian view. Since my proposal places no constraints on the *content* of these so-called categorical imperatives, there is no reason to think that the determination of an agent's will by categorical impera-

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[20] Thus undermining Foot's (1978) critique of categorical imperatives.

tives will result in actions that are morally *right*. There are plenty of immoral social norms. All that my construction does is replace desires that are arbitrary from the moral point of view with principles that are similarly arbitrary.[21] As a result I have simply raised norm-conformity to the level of virtue.

This problem does not show up in the traditional Kantian view because the ultimate principles are normally thought to be morally right, just as basic beliefs are thought to be true. And since all maxims of categorical form are derived from these principles, they are guaranteed to be right simply through their method of derivation. The contextualist, on the other hand, is not in a position to make such a claim, because there is no category of principles that can be taken as basic, and thus nothing to serve as the source of all rightness.

However, the Kantian revisionist can respond by arguing that the requirement that an agent's principles be right, and not just justifiable, merely articulates one of the norms governing practical deliberation, viz. that in order to fully discharge her deliberative obligations, the agent must select a principle that is not only justified here and now, but that she anticipates will remain justified. Agents are held accountable to these deliberative obligations by that fact that they are expected to "stand by" their actions, not just at the time they perform them, but throughout any course of subsequent events. Given this expectation, a definition of "rightness" can be constructed with reference to some idealized version of justification, e.g. that a principle is right if and only if it is currently justifiable, and will continue to be justifiable through any sequences of improvements in the system of norms.[22]

This provides the needed distinction between rightness and mere conformity. We can then say that an action is rational if it can be justified with respect to some system of shared norms, but that it is right only if it would remain justified under any improvement of this system. Justifiability is therefore a property of action that can be lost, while rightness is not.[23]

[21] It might be suggested that I have merely substituted a form of "sociologism" for Humean "psychologism". Even though I will argue that this is not a necessary consequence of my view, I should note that even some kind of "sociologism" would represent an improvement on the Humean view. This is because the instrumental conception of rationality has proven drastically inadequate as a general theory of action for the social sciences. Introducing norm-conformity as a primitive action type would, among other things, provide resources for addressing the so-called "problem of order" in sociology, identified initially by Parsons (1968).

[22] This is intended to parallel Wright's notion of "superassertibility" (1993b, p. 47).

[23] This accommodates what I consider the legitimate "realist" intuition—that we can be collectively mistaken about the morality of an action—while at the same time rejecting the (in my view implausible) brand of moral realism that treats rightness as a recognition-transcendent property of actions.

Thus we could say, for instance, that the denial of voting rights to women may have been justifiable at some time in the 19th century, but it was not right, precisely because it has not remained justifiable through a sequence of improvements in our system of norms.

This may appear to simply defer the problem. Under the assumption that we know what it is to improve a system of norms, we know what it is for a principle to be right. But we still have not specified what it is to improve a system of norms. Naturally, there are a number of options available here. I would like to suggest that what it is for one system of norms to improve upon another should be specified through reference to some form of *public contractualist* procedure (*public* contractualism differs from *private* in that it takes the agreement to be secured through argument, rather than the balancing of interests; see Freeman 1990).

To see how this would work, it is helpful to first consider how the question of improvement is handled in contextualist epistemologies. Some beliefs, e.g. perceptual reports, clearly arise in a "cognitively spontaneous" manner. These beliefs will be unproblematic in most contexts. However, when an agent is called upon to justify such beliefs, according to the no-foundations view, he cannot appeal directly to their spontaneous origin. The preferred option is to appeal to higher-order beliefs that specify, *ceteris paribus*, when cognitively spontaneous beliefs are warranted, e.g. when one observes an object under standard perceptual conditions, or when one has a clear memory of an event, etc. Thus, questioning a cognitively spontaneous belief moves the discussion to a higher-level discussion of what constitutes adequate warrant for a belief.

The Kantian revisionist can adopt a similar construction in the case of justifying principles. We can suppose that there are "spontaneously arising" principles of action—the set of accepted social norms—that have a *prima facie* rightness claim. In everyday contexts, when agents get together to perform tasks, coordination demands that they generate, either tacitly or explicitly, rules to govern their interaction. From children's games to complex bureaucracies, rules arise endogenously out of social interaction. These norms are able effectively to coordinate social interaction by virtue of their ability to provide shared expectations. But in so far as each agent must voluntarily adopt the principle prescribed by the norm as the basis for her practical deliberations, the effectiveness of the norm rests in the end upon its *acceptance* by all those who are to be bound by it.

This means that the system of norms will always be based on certain shared agreements. While these norms are usually taken for granted, questioning them initiates a higher-level discussion about whether these norms are warranted. In this case, the higher-order principles that will decide the case one way or the other test the admissibility of a norm based on the

quality of the underlying agreement. Thus agreements that are, e.g. secured through coercion, or concluded without extensive consultation, would fail to meet the standards of justification built into the higher-order practical principles. These constraints could then be specified in accordance with some form of contractualism, like Habermas's (1990), which essentially attempts to articulate the view that agreements must be *freely* acceptable to *all*. Improvement of the norm system could then be characterized in terms of increased satisfaction of these procedural constraints.

This construction neatly integrates the basic machinery of a contractualist theory of morality into a contextualist account of practical reasoning. The significance of agreement is explained by its role in the introduction of principles—agreement provides the "raw material" for practical reason, in the same way that experience does for theoretical. The constraints that are standardly imposed upon the contract procedure are accommodated as a form of higher-order practical principle (paralleling the notion of a higher-order belief). These higher-order considerations are required because when social norms are challenged, the debate becomes reflexive, in so far as the topic shifts from reasons for action to the quality of these reasons.

The major advantage of this construction is that it closes the "compliance gap" in traditional contractualism between what agents will agree to do and what they will actually do, without recourse to any *ad hoc* motivational devices. For instance, one need not argue, as Scanlon does, that the social contract is effective in governing conduct because agents will be moved by the "desire to be able to justify one's actions to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject" (Scanlon 1982, p. 116). One need only claim that agents will act rationally, where acting rationally is understood to mean "in a way that is justifiable to others on grounds they could not reasonably reject". This is because the public contractualist procedure for testing norms is nothing other than a contextualist procedure for justifying principles of action. Thus the social contract apparatus adds nothing to the theory of action above and beyond that which can be unpacked from the conception of practical rationality. This is one way of developing the fundamental Kantian intuition that acting morally is, in one sense, just acting rationally.

6. Conclusion

This is no doubt highly controversial, and the details remain to be developed. My objective in the previous two sections has not been to develop a complete account of moral reasoning. My ambition has simply been to

show architectonically how a contractualist account of morality could be fit together with a contextualist account of practical reasoning. Such a construction would be attractive in so far as it offers a straightforward form of moral cognitivism without requiring either objective values or ultimate principles. My broader contention is that options like this have been overlooked because of a pervasive foundationalism in the received view of practical rationality. While it is always possible that some form of foundationalism will turn out to be the best account of theoretical reason, this is not something that should be taken for granted in debates over morality. More adventurously, we might suppose that the more powerful account of practical reasoning that a no-foundations view allows us to develop provides a further reason for the rejection of foundationalism in all of its forms.[24]

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