



Mark Schroeder. *Slaves of the Passions.*

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Book Reviews

Mark Schroeder. *Slaves of the Passions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. ix + 224. ISBN 978-0-19-929950-8, Cloth, \$75.00. ISBN 978-0-19-957572-5, Paper, \$35.00.

In *Slaves of the Passions*, Mark Schroeder provides a systematic, rigorously argued defense of a Humean theory of reasons for action, taking pains to respond to influential objections to the view. While inspired by Hume, Schroeder makes it clear that he aims to develop a *Humean* theory, not necessarily one that Hume himself embraced, and for this reason little is said about Hume in the book. One respect in which Schroeder takes himself to be departing from Hume is in developing a normative account. On his reading, Hume held that only beliefs could stand in the *reason* relation (187, n11), whereas Schroeder, like many contemporary Humeans, holds that actions can as well. He sets out to develop a theory of this relation. Of special interest, I think, is the extent to which Schroeder is willing to reject what are often regarded as central commitments of a Humean position, as I highlight below. His discussion provides an extremely helpful framework for thinking through the Humean view. It should be of great interest to participants in the reasons debate and to anyone who is dissatisfied with Hume's denial that actions can be reasonable or unreasonable and who wonders how his insights might be developed.

A familiar argument for the Humean theory starts with the claim that reasons must be able to motivate, adds that desire is necessary for motivation, and

concludes that having a reason requires having a desire. Schroeder instead takes the primary rationale for the theory to be that it explains an agent's reasons, and differences among agents' reasons, more plausibly than its rivals. In many cases, he claims, we should explain an agent's reasons by appealing to elements of his psychology (e.g., Ronnie's reason to go to the party is explained by the facts that he likes to dance and that there will be dancing there). The "Humean thought" is that if there is to be a unified explanation of why people have the reasons they do, and if reasons are *sometimes* explained by appealing to psychological features of agents, then they must *always* be explained in this way (2).

The Humean theory as such does not identify which psychological feature is involved (e.g., desire, pleasure, valuing) or explain exactly how it gives rise to a reason, however. This is important, Schroeder argues, for influential recent criticisms of the theory rest upon assumptions about how the Humean explanation must work—assumptions that a Humean can reject (5). It's often supposed, for example, that the psychological state involved is desire, that this desire must figure in the content of a reason, and that the weight of a reason is a function of the strength of desire together with how well an action promotes it. These assumptions lead to familiar objections to the Humean view, including the following: (1) it makes practical reasoning too self-regarding, focused on the agent's desires; (2) it gives the wrong answer to the question of why considerations are reason-giving, i.e., because they promote the agent's desires; (3) it neglects to defend its foundational claim that desires figure in the explanation of every reason; (4) it generates too many reasons, counting things as reason-giving that clearly are not; and (5) it generates too few reasons, failing, in particular, to yield agent-neutral moral reasons.

A substantial part of Schroeder's defense of the Humean theory (chapters 2–7) consists in responding to these objections. The explanatory framework of his preferred version, which he calls "Hypotheticalism," emerges through these arguments. In chapter 2, he argues that in a Humean view desire need only appear in the background conditions of a reason and not in its content, allowing the theory to escape objections (1) and (2). In chapters 3 and 4, he argues that the Humean theory can defend its foundational claim by offering the right kind of reductive analysis of what a reason is. In chapters 5–7, he argues that in a Humean view the weight of a reason needn't be a function of the strength of desire, and uses this to respond to objections (4) and (5). The remaining chapters fill in elements of Hypotheticalism. In chapter 8, Schroeder explains why he thinks desire, analyzed in phenomenological-cum-dispositional terms, is the psychological state that underpins reasons, arguing that it can motivate rational action in the right way. In chapter 9, he explores the implications of the account for normative epistemology and motivation; in chapter 10, he addresses the concern that the Humean theory bars the rational assessment of desires; and in chapter 11, he examines the deep motivations for the Humean view.

Each chapter of this excellent book rewards careful attention. In the limited space available here I shall focus on difficulties with two arguments Schroeder develops to defend Hypotheticalism against objections.

In chapter 2, Schroeder distinguishes between a reason's background conditions, which explain why it is a reason, and its content, which states what the reason is, arguing that the Humean view should claim that desires figure only in the background conditions. This, he argues, allows the Humean to accept the "Deliberative Constraint," which requires that a properly deliberating agent think directly in terms of her reasons, without having to concede that the agent's reasoning must focus on her desires and so be overly self-regarding (23). Likewise, it enables the Humean to avoid giving a counterintuitive answer to the "why?" question, for if desires are not part of the content of reasons, they need not figure in the answer (39). I am skeptical that this distinction between background conditions and content can satisfy the concerns behind these objections, however. Schroeder does not say why he thinks the Deliberative Constraint should be respected, but one reason to think so is that it seems, intuitively, that to act rationally an agent needs to understand the justification for her actions, including both the surface reason ("there will be dancing at the party") and the explanation of why this is a reason ("I like to dance"). Background conditions that play an essential role in fixing normative content should be regarded as part of the justification and need to be available to the deliberating agent if she is to meet the Deliberative Constraint. Similarly, relegating desires to the background does not meaningfully change their role in answering the "why?" question since they remain an essential part of the justification.

The second argument I want to examine appears in chapters 5–7. Schroeder denies that in a Humean account the weight of a reason must be a function of the strength of desire together with how well an action promotes desire. An agent *has* a reason to do an action, he argues, if the action promotes her desires to some degree (99). The reason's *weight*, however, and so ultimately what an agent ought to do, is determined by whether the right kind of reasons favor giving it weight (where the latter, in turn, are determined by the nature of the relevant activity) (135). This account of weight provides a reply to the too many reasons objection, Schroeder argues, for while Hypotheticalism makes reasons easy to come by, it can explain why many of these reasons are not weighty and so are irrelevant to deliberation (96). The account of weight also allows a reply to the too few reasons worry by suggesting a way to justify agent-neutral moral reasons. If for any agent with desires, moral action promotes at least some of these desires in some way, then every agent has at least some reason to act morally (115). Such reasons are weighty, even equally weighty for all agents, if the right kind of reasons for determining weight require this. The right kind of reasons here, Schroeder argues, are those that any

agent has simply in virtue of placing weight on reasons, i.e., deciding what to do, which every agent is engaged in. So the right kind of reasons are just the class of agent-neutral reasons (142).

I have doubts about the details of each reply, but even if we grant their success, a larger worry remains about this account of weight. Schroeder claims that the primary rationale for the Humean theory is that its appeal to psychological features of agents enables it to explain better than its rivals both why particular agents have the reasons that they do and why agents' reasons differ. However, in disregarding strength of desire when assessing the weight of both agent-neutral reasons of morality and agent-relative personal reasons for individual agents and giving normative priority to the verdict of the right kind of reasons, Schroeder drives a substantial wedge between reasons and the psychologies of individual agents. In his central examples, Ryan's reason to help Katie is judged weighty despite the weakness of Ryan's desire, while Aunt Margaret's reason to build a spaceship in the backyard is not, despite the strength of her desire (142–44). This strongly suggests that Hypotheticalism is not especially well positioned to explain why particular agents have the reasons they do, or why agents' reasons differ. Furthermore, giving this kind of normative priority to the right kind of reasons seems unjustified in a Humean framework. Schroeder characterizes the right kind of reasons for an activity as those that “the people involved in that activity have, *because* they are engaged in that activity” (135). This suggests that an analysis of the nature of activities can identify standards that anyone engaging in them has reason to follow. However, even if an agent is already engaged in an activity, she may have her own view about how to carry it out; unless she aims to perform the activity exactly as it is characterized in the analysis, there seems to be nothing in a Humean account to give “the right reasons” normative force for her.

Despite these objections, I think there is a great deal to be learned from this very fine book. Schroeder's insightful examination of how explanations of normative reasons work nicely clarifies the dispute between Humeans and their critics, while his able defense of the Humean view shows that it has greater resources than critics have recognized. Indeed, as developed, it may even be a view that Hume would have found attractive.

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