In Defence of Proportionalism

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Abstract: In his book *Slaves of the Passions*, Mark Schroeder defends a Humean theory of reasons. Humeanism is the view that you have a reason to X only if X-ing promotes at least one of your desires. But Schroeder rejects a natural companion theory of the weight of reasons, which he calls *proportionalism*. According to it, the weight of a reason is proportionate to the strength of the desire that grounds it and the extent to which the act promotes the object of that desire. In this paper, I aim to do three things: (1) to show why Schroeder's arguments against proportionalism do not refute it, (2) to identify the real trouble with proportionalism, and (3) to suggest a better way of understanding it (*preferentialism*). According to this theory, the overal strength of reasons is determined by the agent's preferences.

Introduction

Mark Schroeder defends a Humean theory of reasons in his book *Slaves of the Passions* (Schroeder 2007). Humeanism is the view that you have a reason to X only if X-ing promotes at least one of your desires. But Schroeder rejects a natural companion theory of the weight of reasons, which he calls *proportionalism*. According to it, the weight of a reason is proportionate to the strength of the desire that grounds it and the extent to which the act promotes the object of that desire. In this paper, I aim to do three things: (1) to show why Schroeder's arguments against proportionalism do not refute it, (2) to identify the real trouble with proportionalism, and (3) to suggest a better way of understanding it (*preferentialism*).

1. Schroeder's arguments against proportionalism

Humeanism is the view that you have a reason to X only if X-ing promotes at least one of your desires. Schroeder explicates the notion of promotion in terms of probability raising: an act X promotes one of your desires if and only if there is some p such that p is the object of one of your desires, and the likelihood of p is raised by X-ing (relative to some baseline) (Schroeder 2007: 113). Schroeder's hypotheticalism says that R is a reason for A to X if and only if there is some p such that p is the

object of one of A's desires, and the truth of R is part of what explains why X-ing raises the probability that p (Schroeder 2007: 59).

Suppose one takes Schroeder's view. It is then quite natural to make the weight of a reason depend on the amount by which it raises the probability that p. So (in a simple case where only one desire for p is relevant): R1 is a stronger reason for A to X than R2 if and only if the amount by which R1 raises the probability that p is greater than the amount by which R2 raises the probability that p.

But the amount by which the probability of some object of desire is raised cannot exhaust what matters to the weight of reasons. One may have several desires with different objects. If I desire both p and q, and R1's truth is part of what explains why X-ing raises the probability that p, but R2's truth is part of what explains why Y-ing raises the probability that q, I cannot simply compare the relative amounts by which R1 and R2 respectively raise the probability that p and q. Even if R2 raises the probability that q much more than R1 raises the probability that p, I may still have stronger reason to p. This is, arguably, because my desire for p could be stronger than my desire for q. In other words: p may be more important to me than q. So, for a Humean, there is another natural dimension along which the strength of a reason can vary: namely the intensity of the desire whose object is made more likely by the reason.[1]

Mark Schroeder calls this view *proportionalism*, because according to it the strength of a reason to X for an agent A is proportional to the amount by which X-ing raises the probability that p and the strength of A's desires for p. He provides three reasons to reject it. I will discuss these in reverse order.

One reason Schroeder gives to reject proportionalism is that it would make it hard to explain why it is a truism that it is always correct to place more weight on a reason that is weightier (Schroeder 2007: 101). But whether this is mysterious depends on what one means by 'correct deliberation'. Suppose it means 'deliberation in accordance with the weight that reasons have'. If that's what it means, then it is trivially true that one deliberates correctly if and only if one places more weight on a reason that is weightier. But that does not preclude any account of what determines the weight of reasons, including proportionalism.

Schroeder's second reason to reject proportionalism is that questions about the weight of reasons are normative questions, and therefore cannot be settled by facts about the amount by which desires are promoted, or their intensity (Schroeder 2007:

100). As David Sobel points out, however, this is a puzzling thing to say for a Humean (Sobel 2009). Apparently, the question of what reasons there are is settled by facts about desires, but the question of their weight is not. But why would questions about the extent to which something counts in favour of an act be normative, but not questions about what counts in favour in the first place?

Schroeder's third reason to reject proportionalism is that it seems extensionally incorrect (Schroeder 2007: 100). There are cases where A's reason to X is intuitively weak, even though A's desire which is promoted by X-ing is very strong. Here is an example:

> My Aunt Margaret wants to reconstruct the scene depicted on page 78 of the November 2001 *Martha Stewart Living* catalogue on Mars. In order to do this, she needs to construct a Mars-bound spacecraft – for no one is going to give her one. Nevertheless, intuitively, Aunt Margaret still ought not to build her Mars-bound spacecraft. (Schroeder 2007: 84)[2]

But this example is unconvincing. The intuition that Aunt Margaret's reason is weak (even if her desire is strong) might be explained by the fact that she has very little chance of succeeding in her aim (to rebuild the scene on Mars). After all, proportionalism makes the strength of a reason depend not just on the strength of your desire for p, but also on the extent to which p is probable given suitable action.

So Schroeder needs an example in which we still judge that the reason is weak even if the act is both strongly desired by the agent and highly conducive to the object of desire.[3] Perhaps the following is one: a psychopath strongly desires to torture some puppies, which he can do by burning them with a poker. Doing so is highly likely to result in agony, so the act is highly conducive to the object of desire. Is there strong reason for the psychopath to burn the puppies with a poker? You may well think not.

But even examples of this kind do not clearly refute proportionalism *if* you are attracted to Humeanism in the first place. For what is the driving intuition behind this view? It is that what reasons *you* have depend on *your* desires. Indeed, *Slaves of the Passions* starts with the observation that if Ronnie likes to dance and there is dancing at the party, then Ronnie has a reason to go. Bradley, who doesn't like to dance, does not have this reason. But this same intuition supports the idea that the *weight* that reasons have for you depends on your desires. If you don't care very much about

dancing, you don't have strong reason to go. So I think that Schroeder has to choose: he should either deny that intuitions like these support the idea that reasons depend on agents' desires, or accept that they also support the idea that their weight depends on their desires.

But even if the above line of argument fails, there is more that could be said about examples like the psychopath. We can invoke a distinction, made by Gilbert Harman, between inner and outer 'ought' judgments (Harman 2000a). An inner 'A ought to X' judgment entails that the agent A has sufficient reason to X. Indeed, Harman thinks it is equivalent to such a judgment (Harman 2000a: 10). Since he believes that our best understanding of reasons is (broadly) Humean, he thinks that such a judgment is false if the agent lacks the relevant desires.[4] But we can still make the *outer* judgment that A ought to X. This he interprets as an evaluative judgment to the effect that we (speaker and audience) have sufficient reason to *hope* or *desire* that A will X. Since this outer 'ought' does not entail that the *agent* has sufficient reason to X, it can be true even if the agent lacks the relevant desires.

The proportionalist could say that normative intuitions like the one about the psychopath reflect inner evaluative judgments. They reflect something about the reasons that *we* (appraisers of the act) have. When we judge that there is lots of reason for the psychopath not to torture puppies, we don't focus on the *psychopath*'s desires. This is why it is more natural to say 'There *is* lots of reason not to torture' than it is to say 'The psychopath *has* lots of reason not to torture'. For there is a sense in which these reasons are not reasons *for the psychopath* (this is the driving intuition behind Humeanism). But the same goes for the weight of reasons. If the psychopath only has weak desires which are promoted by abstaining from torture, then there is a sense in which *he* lacks strong reason to avoid it. So the judgment 'There is sufficient reason for the psychopath not to torture puppies' might be interpreted as: 'There is sufficient reason for us to hope that the psychopath abstains'. But it would be false that *the psychopath* has sufficient reason.

2. The real trouble with proportionalism

So Schroeder's arguments do not clearly refute proportionalism. But there are deeper problems. The proportionalist claims that the weight of a reason is a function of two magnitudes: (1) the amount by which an act raises the probability of an object of

desire and (2) the strength or intensity of the desire for that object. Proportionalism, then, predicts that whenever I have a stronger desire for p than for q, I have stronger reason to do the act which is conducive to p (other things being equal).

Let us ask whether this rings true as a matter of phenomenological fact. Is it true that my own judgments about what I have stronger reason to do correspond to the intensity of my desires?

Now it becomes important what is meant by 'stronger' or 'more intense' desire. In the everyday sense of 'strong desire' I may have strong desire to do things that I myself judge to have weak reasons for (e.g. eat a mountain of chocolate, cheat on my partner, or whatever). So if this is what is meant by 'intensity of desire' (let's call it *felt intensity*), proportionalism is false as a matter of phenomenological fact.

Is there another way to understand intensity which does not falsify proportionalism? It obviously won't work to say that a desire is stronger (in the relevant sense) than another (in a context) iff it causes one to act (or if it is the desire on which one acts) in that context. For I may eat the mountain of chocolate, but deny that I have strong reason to do so.

I also doubt that one could give a fruitful dispositional analysis of the strenght of a desire. One version would say that a desire is stronger than another iff it tends to cause behaviour (or tends to be the desire on which one acts). But I don't see why one couldn't systematically succumb to temptation, yet retain one's judgment that one's reasons are weak.

Another version of the dispositional account would be counterfactual: it would say that a desire is stronger than another iff it would cause one to act (or would be the desire on which one acts) provided certain conditions hold. But if these conditions include the absence of countervailing desires, then this type of claim is true for all desires whatsoever.

So I take it that no dispositional analysis of the strength of a desire will work to ground claims about the weight of reasons. Nor will analyses in terms of felt intensity. But we can improve on these ideas.

3. Preferentialism

I think the most promising route for the proportionalist is to understand strength of desire in terms of preferences.[5] One can directly correlate the overall strength of

reasons with a preference ranking. This way we can also include the extent to which an act is conducive to an act as a factor in the weight of reasons. For preferences may be informed by beliefs about promotiveness.

The idea is very simple, and as follows:

> **More Reason (preferential):** There is more (i.e. stronger) reason to X than there is to Y for an agent A just in case A prefers X-ing over Y-ing.[6]

What if the agent has false beliefs about the extent to which X-ing and Y-ing are conducive to objects of desire? In that case, it only seems to him or her *as if* s/he has strong reasons. This shows that More Reason (preferential) defines what it is for an agent "subjectively" to have more reason to X than to Y. The "objective" strength of her reasons to X corresponds to the preference ordering s/he would have in case her beliefs about conduciveness (and other relevant beliefs) were true.

I think More Reason (preferential) makes good sense of the mountain of chocolate case, because I can prefer not to act on my desire to eat it (and thus think that I have most reason not to do it) even if I do. To see this, reflect that I may be a libertarian free agent. I may decide to act against my considered preferences. More Reason (preferential) also allows that the desire to eat the mountain of chocolate has greater felt intensity than any other desire. For my preferences needn't correspond to felt intensities.

There is a sense in which More Reason (preferential) does not make the extent to which an act raises the likelihood of the object of desire an independent factor in the weight of reasons. By this I mean that the role of conduciveness in determining weight is mediated via the agent's preferences. Suppose A desired p and knew that X-ing made p more likely than Y-ing, yet preferred Y-ing over X-ing (and not because Y-ing has other desired consequences). More Reason (preferential) then predicts that A has more reason to Y than to X. That may seem wrong. But it's not clear whether a Humean should think it wrong, or whether this scenario is possible.

If it matters to reasons and their weight what you desire, then it matters what you prefer. For preferences are arguably a kind of desire. The difference between desires and preferences is often thought to lie in this that whereas ordinary desires relate a person to a single proposition, preferences relate a person to two (or more)

propositions. If preferences are indeed desires, then there is no reason why they should not matter to the weight of reasons (for a Humean, at least).

I've also indicated that the scenario might be impossible. We can all agree that there is something strange about a person who desires p yet (for no apparent reason) prefers acts that are less conducive to p than others. This is a kind of schizophrenia of desire. The intuition that A has stronger reason to X than to Y might be due to the fact that this scenario is hard to imagine and could well be impossible (in some suitable modality). For if A *does* desire p, and the only relevant difference between X and Y is that X is more conducive to p than Y, then this should throw doubt on the idea that A *really* prefers Y over X.

So it is not clear that the foregoing example throws doubt on More Reason (preferential). This idea (let's call it *preferentialism*) is a natural partner of a Humean theory of reasons (much more natural than Schroeder's obscure alternative in chapter 7 of 2007; for criticism, see Evers 2009). For preferentialism makes the weight of reasons, like reasons themselves, depend on psychological properties of the agent.

4. Some objections

One objection to preferentialism is that preferences don't come in degrees, but strength of desire does. However, this matters only if the weight of a reason comes in degrees in a way which requires something like the way in which desires have degrees of felt intensity. But I don't think this is the case. Judging that some reasons are stronger than others involves a kind of ordering: some things rank higher than others. But preferences do exactly that: they determine a ranking.

Another objection to the account concerns the identity conditions of preferences. Take the person who systematically succumbs to temptation. Could it really be true that s/he prefers not to eat mountains of chocolate if she does it all the time? Isn't a person's behaviour indicative of his or her preferences?

I think the following response is available to the proportionalist: normally, behavioural evidence is a reliable guide to a person's mental states. But not always. Whether systematic choice against one's professed preferences indicates their nonexistence depends on what explains the deviation. If, by manipulating your brain at relevant moments, a mad scientist *makes* you choose against your preferences, one may still have them. Furthermore, if one allows that one may *occasionally* act against

one's preferences, then why could whatever mechanism that involves not kick in at every choice point? If one can *sometimes* act on a desire which one does not endorse, then why could this not happen *every time*, at least in principle? Systematic weakness of will might be rare, but it is not impossible.

The idea that it could not happen every time seems based on the thought that what it is to prefer something is to be disposed to choose it or promote it (or something along these lines). And that may well be right. But it does not follow that anyone so disposed necessarily chooses what s/he prefers more often than not. No statistical reading of 'being disposed' will do the trick, because many factors may inhibit dispositions. But if so, inhibitions may occur in every case where one would otherwise expect manifestation.[7] Thus, to insist that a person could not prefer X over Y just because s/he systematically fails to choose X over Y would be to conflate conditions for *being in a state* with conditions for *warranted ascription* of that state.

Conclusion

I have argued that Schroeder's arguments against proportionalism do not refute it. But I have also argued that the weight of a reason is not proportionate to the strength of a desire in any natural sense of 'strength'. Nevertheless, there is a viable conception of proportionalism. According to this view (*preferentialism*), the overall strength of reasons is determined by one's preferences. The higher an act ranks in the agent's preference ordering, the more (subjective) reason the agent has to do it. I think this theory retains the spirit of proportionalism, because preferences for acts are often (perhaps even necessarily) informed by beliefs about conduciveness.

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Notes

[1] Similarly, two acts may make it certain that I realize a different object of desire. But this does not, intuitively, entail that I have equally weighty reason for both acts.

[2] Schroeder is happy to accept that Aunt Margaret has *some* reason to build her spacecraft. He provides an explanation of the intuition that even this is false. The explanation invokes pragmatic principles governing normative discourse. We usually say that there is a reason for A to X only if that reason is relatively weighty. The intuition that there is no reason for Aunt Margaret to build the spacecraft may be due to connotations of weightiness attached to statements about reasons. But the admission that there is a reason for Aunt Margaret to build the spacecraft is compatible with the denial that this reason is strong. One way of achieving this result is by rejecting proportionalism.

[3] Of course, it is also required that the intuition doesn't depend on the agent's having many *other* desires which would be frustrated by building the spacecraft. If it *would* depend on that, the example would still not show that the weight of a reason is not proportionate.

[4] Harman's view is that 'A has sufficient moral reason to X' is true just in case A would decide to X absent akrasia, ignorance of nonmoral facts and failures of instrumental reasoning (see Harman 2000b).

[5] Sobel 2009 also suggests that if proportionalism is understood in terms of preferences it would not so obviously fail as a theory of weight.

[6] More Reason (preferential) is of course reminiscent of expected utility theory, according to which the expected utility of an act is determined by the probability of the object of desire and the strength of desire for that object (for an overview, see Joyce 1999). The expected utility function is meant to represent a subject's (rational) preferences. But we've seen that there is no obvious (non-preferential) understanding of 'strength of desire' which can be used as an ingredient in determining the weight of reasons. More Reason (preferential) bypasses this problem by directly defining weight in terms of preferences.

[7] This kind of possibility generates much of the trouble with conditional analyses of 'fragile', for example.

References

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