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## **Critical Notice of Tamar Schapiro, *Feeling like it***

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Sometimes we feel like doing things we might not do. An irresolute exerciser, I frequently feel like laying on the couch instead of jogging; angered by bad referee calls, I sometimes feel like yelling at the TV; a committed teacher, I often feel like writing extensive comments on students's paper. States of this sort, that motivate you "while leaving you free to act on or not", are what Schapiro calls 'inclinations' (p.10). The class thus includes a multitude of states such as primal and complex emotions, feelings, desires for general or particular things, and even our core commitments. Despite otherwise important differences between these states, the aim of Schapiro's book is to offer a unified account of inclinations and their implications for rational agency.

The book constitutes the culmination of a series of pioneering writings questioning a long-standing tendency to ignore inclinations. The reasons for neglect are complex. Partly, I suspect, it had to do with (early) Davidson's still influential idea that all desires (or 'pro-attitudes') play the same role in the explanation of action; partly, Bratman's classic work drawing out the importance and distinctiveness of intentions led to an unfortunate neglect of other desiderative states. By contrast, Schapiro persuasively shows that our understanding of agency will be incomplete without an account of inclination.

Schapiro addresses the topic through what she dubs the ‘Kantian method’.<sup>1</sup> Instead of seeking a causal or mechanistic explanation of some phenomenon, the aim of the Kantian method is to render an activity intelligible from the standpoint of a “participant to the form of activity in which the participant is engaged” (p.21). For example, instead of looking for causal antecedents that may explain what distinguishes an action from other events, the Kantian method focuses on understanding the concepts that the agent must employ if she is to act at all. Schapiro’s central examples are the concepts of means and ends. To act at all, the agent must grasp (at least implicitly) these concepts, making it possible to engage in an a priori inquiry about them that exploits this understanding. Since she takes inclinations to be equally essential to agency, Schapiro’s discussion centers on questions that an agent can address just by reflecting on her own agency, and she eschews attempts to approach the question via scientific methods.

Despite my sympathy for the main parts of this methodology, I have two quibbles. First, unlike Schapiro, I think of the scientific and the ‘Kantian’ methods as complimentary rather than rivals, exerting mutual pressure on each other: presumed conceptual truths can be enriched, corrected, and refined through empirical insights. All the more so for a topic like inclinations, since it is not fully a rational phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Second, Schapiro distances herself from Anscombe, whom she criticizes for inquiring into agency from “our standpoint as knowers” rather than agents (pp.23-4n20). However, this criticism presupposes a dichotomy between the practical and the epistemic of precisely the sort Anscombe rejects, and that must be rejected to pursue the Kantian method. After all, this method presupposes that agents possess some understanding of what they are doing

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<sup>1</sup> Schapiro’s inspiration for this methodology is Kant, and Korsgaard. Some authors working in the Anscombean tradition also embrace a method along these lines. See especially Lavin (2013) and Ford (2017) drawing on Thompson (2008).

<sup>2</sup> For example, recent empirical work suggests that part of the way in which desires exert their influence is not merely by exerting practical pressure, but also by changing our outlook and evaluation of the options (see e.g. Holton (2009) and Yaffe (2011) for discussion).

to be exploited by philosophical reflection. If we could engage in agency unwittingly—as workers do, on Marx’s story, when alienated from their labour—then we could not expect to gain an understanding of agency just by such reflection. Anscombe’s view that practical knowledge is in some sense essential to agency is therefore not optional for those of us attracted to something like the Kantian method. It is its foundation.

The project of the book is animated by a puzzle that arises from reflection on what Schapiro calls “the moment of drama” (p.10, *et passim*), the moment when we feel the pull of inclination while realizing we are free to not act on it. On the one hand, inclinations seem to affect us as extraneous entities, arising against our will and possibly requiring *resistance* (e.g. from yelling at the tv). On the other hand, inclinations seem to be *our own*: we are responsible for what we do under them; and when we act from an inclination, we genuinely *act*. Falling on the couch overtaken by an inclination to rest is very different from falling down the stairs. Thus, there is pressure to think of inclinations as “something that simply happens to us” and as “something we do” (p.33).

Schapiro approaches the puzzle about inclinations by first considering two positions that take opposing sides on it. Chapter 2 discusses the “Brute Force View”, which holds that inclinations affect us as external objects, like the force of a river stream. Chapter 3 discusses the “Practical Thinking View” (ch.3), which holds that inclinations are manifestations of our wills on a par with decisions and actions. Schapiro presents powerful and convincing objections to different versions of these views. I cannot do full justice to these objections, but the core problem can be stated in terms of three central desiderata for a theory of inclinations, to wit:

- (1) Asymmetric Pressure (p.44-5): “Given that you are inclined to  $\phi$ , there is a kind of pressure on your will to go along with your inclination, a pressure that it is the role of will power to oppose”.
- (2) Non-voluntariness (p.46): Unlike decisions, inclinations are beyond voluntary control: “you can  $\phi$  at will, but you cannot feel like  $\phi$ -ing at will” (p.71).

(3) Deliberative role (p.48): “When you are inclined to  $\phi$ , your inclination plays the deliberative role of a sort of directive, telling you what to do.”

Schapiro argues that the Brute Force View is attractive insofar as it seems to meet (1) and (2): the force of a river can make it easier to swim downstream than upstream, and—miracles aside—it isn’t under your command. However, it fails at explaining (3) since externals do not provide directives. In contrast, the Practical Thinking View can explain (3), but has trouble with (1) and (2): our decisions and actions do not oppose our wills, but manifest them (*contra* (1)); and our actions are precisely what we do voluntarily (*contra* 2).

Schapiro begins to develop her alternative position in Chapter 4, by rejecting “motivational monism”, the view that there is a single form of motivation, so that there is no middle term between “something that happens to you and something you do” (p.88). Following the Platonic tradition, she argues that to account for inclinations, we must recognize that we are motivationally complex creatures, made of parts that may push us in opposing directions: “when you are inclined but not determined to  $\phi$ , what you are relating to is a part of you that has already determined itself to  $\phi$ ” (p.85).

To understand what this means we must return to the moment of drama, and assess it from the standpoint of our “inner animal”. According to Schapiro, what happens is that you are “drawn out of yourself”: you realize that you are, in a sense, divided, because there is a part of you—the “inner animal”—that is *already* pursuing a certain activity. For example, your inner animal is already engaged in the activity of laying down on the couch—through neural and somatic processes preparing you to lay down—even as you simultaneously plan for a jog. It is up to you whether to identify with the animal part by pursuing that activity (laying down), or not (going for a jog). An inclination cannot determine the will: you must choose. Thus, you can either take the *high*

*road*, transforming the inclination into a maxim, a principle of action that can be endorsed by your will; or you can take the *low road*, yielding to your inclination and letting it control your actions, descending as close as you can to mere animal agency. Chapters 5 and 6 explore what is involved in each option, completing Schapiro's exposition of her view.

When you take the high road in the moment of drama, you exercise your agency by implementing your inclination into a decision. However, inclinations are neither the sorts of motivating principles that one can act on, nor even ones that present *proposals* to reason (as in Korsgaard's picture). These views over-rationalize inclinations and would face the problems with the Practical Thinking View (p.119-127). Rather, inclination are *inarticulate* states, representing an object in a way that does not afford a distinction between the action called-for and the object of pursuit (as would be required for rational choice). For example, when one has an inclination with a content <chocolatey-to-be-eatenness>, the chocolate is not represented as a distinct entity of which it would make sense to ask whether it should be pursued or not: to represent that content is already to be engaged in a certain pursuit. This is why it is impossible to make a decision based on this representation alone: you can't choose chocolate-y-to-be-eaten. To act, therefore, one must "incorporate" the inclination into a maxim through deliberation (p.132ff.).

The book's discussion of what's involved in incorporation is underdeveloped, but a forthcoming piece clarifies matters.<sup>3</sup> I recommend reading it as an appendix to the book. There, Schapiro argues that it is not enough for the agent to just articulate the content of the inclination, for instance, from <chocolatey-to-be-eatenness> to the articulate representation <eat a chocolate>. This is because the latter still has an "outward description", whereas a maxim "is a description of your action, under which you find it worthy of your choice" (p.197). Therefore, the agent must

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<sup>3</sup> (Schapiro, forthcoming).

take account of the full set of circumstances she is in, and represent the action as worthy of choice in these very circumstances. For example, as the server brings chocolate at the end of a meal, you might endorse a maxim such as <eat a chocolate at the restaurant, by grabbing it from the plate, while I'm still hungry, etc.>. This, finally, is the kind of representation under which an agent can act.

In other circumstances, however, the inclinations are not fit to be made into maxims: perhaps you have committed to a diet that doesn't allow sweets, or perhaps you have eaten enough that it is gluttonous to indulge. Still, you eat the chocolate. This would be to take the 'low road', a matter of weakness of will, and the subject of Chapter 6.

Although weakness of will has been a topic of philosophical investigation going back to Plato, Schapiro argues that a fundamental question remains unaddressed: How can the will be weak? Since inclinations are unfit to act on, how could they even exert pressure on the will? Her answer to this question is one of the most fascinating claims in the book:

*The only thing that can pressure a free will is the burden of freedom itself.* Strictly speaking, our inclinations do not pressure us to do anything. But something about their nature, independent of variations in content, makes it the case that when we are inclined, we are faced with a perfect opportunity to flee the burden of our freedom. (p.147)

The will is free to act, but freedom itself is a "burden". Inclinations provide occasions for the will to unburden itself of this freedom, by identifying with the activity of the inner animal already underway. Such debasing can be simple, as when we pursue a base inclination of the animal part (e.g. eating the chocolate when we shouldn't), or complex, as when our behaviour is determined by social scripts (e.g. not saying something that should be said, because it would be 'impolite').

With all the central elements of Schapiro's account on the table, we can return to consider how it meets the three desiderata she identified for a theory of inclinations. First, the account can explain why there is asymmetric pressure insofar as inclinations provide an occasion to flee one's freedom by identifying with the inner animal's activity underway. Second, it explains the sense in which inclinations are non-voluntary because the activity of your inner animal is not under the will's command; moreover, they are not fit to be acted on in the robust sense given their content. Finally, it explains the deliberative role played by inclinations insofar as these provide "the raw motivational material out of which to try to construct a maxim" (134).

The picture Schapiro offers us is rich and has substantive advantages over its opponents considered. She has convinced me that to make headway in philosophy of action we must reject motivational monism. However, I want to close by arguing that her account is committed to other forms of monism that lead to problems rooted in an inadequate and overly thin understanding of the will.

The first problem is about the unity of the target phenomena: are inclinations a unified class? Consider a dedicated teacher who is committed to providing helpful feedback to her students. She sits down to grade the 60 final essays written for her class. As she starts grading, this general commitment inclines her to think hard about what feedback would best serve each student, and how best to communicate it. Acting on this commitment, she writes good feedback on the first few essays she grades. As she plows through the essays, however, she increasingly feels an inclination to give feedback that will quickly get her through this pile: find a few errors that will sufficiently justify a certain grade, and move along. The teacher is a perceptive one, and as she notices this trend, her commitment to provide helpful feedback inclines her to take a break. She acts on it.

I have described the teacher as having a variety of inclinations, since in each occasion, there is “a sort of directive telling you what to do” which impinges upon her while offering a choice: she is free to provide helpful or lazy feedback, to stop grading or to plow through. Intuitively, though, these are very different states, and not just because of their contents. Rather, the fact that some of these inclinations manifest the teacher’s settled commitments suggests that they have a more intimate connection to the will than those that oppose them.<sup>4</sup> In particular, one has these inclinations in part because they manifest values that one has reflectively endorsed.<sup>5</sup> As such, they are in some sense voluntary and not to be opposed. This suggests that the three desiderata that Schapiro identifies do not apply to all inclinations equally: there are some inclinations that play the deliberative role definitive of the state (inclining towards without determining a course of action), but that are voluntary and not subject to the asymmetric pressure constraint.

Might it be replied that the case is more complex than I am imagining involving, first, the willed settled commitment, and, second, an inarticulate representation stemming from it—viz. the inclination? Cases with this two-step structure are surely possible; but it seems perfectly possible for a settled commitment to manifest in action simply through further calculation, and without the need for a (further) inclination. A different response, then, would be to say that these are not inclinations. However, this directly contradicts the definition of inclinations in terms of their deliberative role. Moreover, there is the problem that *sometimes* an inclination of this sort may need to be opposed. The teacher may need to fight off her inclination to give helpful comments to meet her university’s deadline. The upshot is that we should reject inclinational monism.

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<sup>4</sup> I am also assuming that these are dispositional states. As Wilson (2016) notes, this is needed to account for central features of inclinations, such as their ability to be shaped by practice (an important feature for Schapiro’s account); but it is in tension with the dominant way Schapiro speaks of them, as occurrent states.

<sup>5</sup> This is consistent with Marcus’s (2021) suggestion that these states also differ in their epistemic profile.



Representations of different kinds—different, in particular, with respect to their relation to the will—can play the role in the agential economy that distinguishes inclinations.

The second problem is based on a platitude about inclinations: they come in different degrees of strength. Hence, we speak about ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ temptations, and about being ‘more’ or ‘less’ inclined to do something. The gradability here is of course relative: I don’t have a sweet-tooth, so my inclinations to eat dessert are often weak; but I often eat too much sushi. Your inclinations might be reversed. A theory of inclinations must be able to account for this kind of gradability. However, I do not see a way for Schapiro’s theory to do so.

The root of the problem is her claim that the will can be pressured only by “the burden of freedom itself”. This is a ‘temptational monism’, since every inclination tempts us in the same way, by presenting an opportunity to surrender our freedom. From the standpoint of the will, there is no difference between the inclination to eat a second slice of cake, eating one more maki roll, smoking a cigarette, or giving helpful comments. In the moment of drama, they are all just occasions to surrender one’s freedom. But this strips us of resources to explain why some inclinations are stronger than others.

Appeal to somatic responses (increased influxes of dopamine, sweats, or tinglings) will not help Schapiro, since she is clear that such responses are nothing to the will (p.146). Another strategy would be to apply to degrees of frequency: To say that an inclination is stronger than another, on this view, would be to say that we are disposed to experience it more frequently. However, while this response shows that Schapiro has the resources to explain *some* forms of gradability, it fails to account for variability in degrees of strength. This is clear from the fact that there is cross-variation along these parameters: some inclinations we experience frequently but

weakly (e.g. the constant inclination to grab your phone); while others we experience seldomly but strongly (e.g. the inclination to hug a friend you are seeing only after a long time).

Ultimately, I think these two problems are rooted in too thin an account of the will as essentially impassive, unattached, and monolithically concerned with making free decisions. If, by contrast, we conceive of the will as a capacity that can itself be affected, shaped and attached to certain objects, then it will be much easier to see both how certain inclinations might themselves be manifestations of will, and how it might be easier or harder for it to resist certain inclinations, depending on their relation to the objects of its attachment.<sup>6</sup>

That said, I do not believe that such an alternative account of the will, and its relation to inclinations, has yet been developed at the level of clarity and detail that Schapiro presents in her book. Part of the reason is that certain methodological assumptions have prevented us from seeing the topic of inclinations as one worth philosophical investigation. Schapiro, however, has convinced me that unless we provide such an account, our understanding of agency will be incomplete. In this book she sets the agenda for any future treatment of the topic, which will have to be evaluated in terms of how well it stacks up to the criteria that she carefully lays out.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> An alternative, sketched in the work of Iris Murdoch (following Simone Weil), conceives of the will as instead engaged in a life-long activity of loving attention and discernment, capable of becoming attached to (better or worse) objects, and of transforming one's desires in a way that affects not only the person's decisions, but the space of alternatives available to the agent, and the manner in which they appear to her in the moment of choice (Murdoch, 1970). The writings of John McDowell are the most developed version of this view, which, as Jennifer Whiting (forthcoming) argues, has Aristotelian origins.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to the participants of the Georgia State reading group on *Feeling Like*, to Tamar Schapiro for generous discussion of her views, and to Eric Wilson for incisive comments on a draft.

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