

HOW A MODERN-DAY HUME CAN REJECT A DESIRE CATEGORICALLY: A PERPLEXITY AND A THEORETICALLY MODEST PROPOSAL

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ABSTRACT

We often treat our basic, unmotivated desires as reason-giving: you're thirsty and take yourself to have a reason to walk to the drinking fountain; you care intrinsically about your young daughter and take yourself to have a reason to feed and clothe her. We (behave as though we) think these desires generate normative practical reasons. But are there (satisfiable) basic desires that don't? It might seem so, for we sometimes find ourselves impelled to do some very strange, and some very awful, things. For example, would a loving mother with a violent impulse thereby come to have a reason to harm her beloved child? Let's grant, for the sake of argument, that there are (satisfiable) basic desires, such as the mother's, that fail to generate reasons. Can a subjectivist, a theorist in the Humean tradition, accept this thesis? Against the historical grain, I argue yes. I frame my discussion in terms of solving a puzzle in Harry Frankfurt's subjectivist theory of rational agency and appeal to the concept of a personal ideal to reveal how a subjectivist, a follower of Hume, can countenance the existence of "rationally impotent basic desires."

Keywords: Hume, Frankfurt, subjectivism, rational agency, desires, categorical imperatives, practical reasons, personal ideal, norm of rational impotence.

Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them . . . 'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to chuse my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or a person wholly unknown to me (Hume 1888, 415-416).

I desire and I find myself with a powerful impulse to act. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn't dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I act? Is this desire really a *reason* to act? (Korsgaard 1994, 93).

I don't think odd whims—the passing urge to stick my finger into a gooey substance, or the vertiginous urge to fling myself from a balcony—are considerations in favor of doing those things at all (Cohon 2000, 63).

1. The Perplexity

There is a puzzle, as yet unsolved, within Harry Frankfurt's subtle and otherwise significantly developed theory of rational agency. In this essay, I propose a solution that is simple and friendly to Frankfurt's general theory. My solution also has an important implication for our general theorizing about normative practical reasons: the *best* subjectivist model of rational agency

includes the concept of a “personal ideal.” There is useful theoretical work for this concept to do, beyond helping Frankfurt.

Frankfurt’s puzzle has to do with long-standing disputes among the Humean subjectivist, Kantian constructivist, and (Aristotelian) realist traditions about the ultimate source of normative practical reasons and the rational appraisal of “basic” or “ultimate” desires (Cullity and Gaut 1997). A reader who first confronts the puzzle in Frankfurt’s writing might express it in the following accurate though sketchy way: Frankfurt is a subjectivist about practical reasons, in the Humean tradition, who says some very un-Humean-sounding things, a boisterously polemical anti-Kantian and anti-realist who says some very Kantian- and realist-sounding things. One such thing: Frankfurt believes there are instances in which an agent ought, having determined that one of her own basic, unmotivated desires¹ doesn’t “deserve a voice” in practical deliberation, to “categorically reject” the claim it has made on her.

Take an oft-cited example. A loving mother is shocked and disconcerted to find in herself, while bathing her much beloved infant, an altogether unprecedented impulse to drown him (Watson 1982, 100-101). Frankfurt declares it would be “preposterous”—presumably, either for the mother or for a philosopher—to think this violent desire gives the mother a reason, even a very weak reason, to kill her child (2006, 31). This motivational state, Frankfurt says, should not merely be “assigned a relatively less favored position” in the mother’s decision about what to do; it should be disenfranchised, “extruded entirely as an outlaw” (1988, 170; 2006, 8).

Frankfurt’s reader might sensibly ask, “Isn’t the castigation of categorical norms of practical reasoning a common pastime in the Humean tradition?² And yet Frankfurt eschews this practice. Don’t subjectivists characteristically say that we can properly reason about means, but not ends?³ Or that basic desires are, as Hume himself puts it, ‘original existences’ that cannot be ‘contrary to reason’ (1748, 293)? And yet Frankfurt describes this very claim, so often taken to be a theory-defining tenet of Humean subjectivism, as ‘preposterous.’ Frankfurt thinks the mother would be absolutely correct to judge her basic desire ‘contrary to reason,’ at least in the following sense: though there are effective means to the violent urge’s satisfaction, the mother has, Frankfurt thinks, absolutely ‘no reason whatsoever’ to take any of them. Can a consistent, clear-headed subjectivist, an intellectual heir of David Hume, believe this?”

I think so, and I intend to reveal how. In the neo-Humean⁴ subjectivist view I sketch,

¹ A motivated desire is a desire generated by another desire through a process of instrumental reasoning (Hubin 1991). If you desire health, come to believe drinking water is healthy, and consequently come to desire to drink water as a means, your desire to drink water is a motivated desire. A basic, unmotivated desire is a desire that isn’t generated from another desire in this way. It is, in this sense, an “original existence.”

² A clear example: Dreier (2001).

³ Russell (1954, 8).

⁴ Though contemporary subjectivism draws inspiration from Hume, it departs from him in at least two ways. First, subjectivists generally abandon Hume’s theory that motivational states are feelings; contemporary subjectivists generally accept the (more plausible) thesis that a person can have a desire without feeling it. A second deviation concerns Hume’s reduction of reason to theoretical rationality. Say an agent is motivated, in a basic way, to achieve an end, believes rationally that a particular action is the best means to it, doesn’t think there is any overriding countervailing practical reason, but fails to perform this action. This agent is guilty of a form of non-theoretical irrationality, “means-end irrationality.” A theory of practical rationality should make conceptual room for this possibility (Korsgaard 1986). Hume’s theory doesn’t, whereas contemporary subjectivists not only accept that means-end irrationality is a form of practical irrationality, it generally serves as a paradigm example in their theorizing (Millgram 1995; Smith 1987, 1994).

practical rationality is, broadly speaking, a matter of pursuing what you care about, with proficiency.⁵ And people—some people, at least—care about some very complex things, among them, personal ideals that include norms that specify which desires not to treat as reason-giving.

In this essay, I clarify the central tenets of subjectivism; describe the relevant puzzle, indicating why it initially seems so difficult for a subjectivist to solve it; sketch my proposal; and—because my theoretically modest solution is relatively simple—suggest why this proposal hasn't yet been recognized.⁶ To solve his puzzle, Frankfurt needs to make both a change in argumentative tactic and a distinction between two varieties of desire “extrusion.”

2. What Is Subjectivism about Practical Reasons?

Let's understand a normative practical reason, hereafter ‘practical reason,’ to be a consideration in favor of *doing* something.⁷ It's a proper input into practical deliberation, a normative entity that ought to be counted in the process of deciding what to do. I'll regard a practical reason as a *pro tanto* consideration: it does supply a positive consideration in favor of doing something, a consideration that ought to be weighed against whatever other practical reasons an agent happens to have, though it could conceivably be outweighed by one or more of them. For example, you might have a practical reason to take the afternoon off, but a weightier practical reason to put your nose to the grindstone.

Subjectivism is, among other things, a theory about the ultimate source of practical reasons. It claims that an agent's practical reasons, all of them, ultimately derive from among the “elements” of “his subjective motivational set, S” (Williams 1994)—or, put more commonsensically, from among his own desires. This claim has been called, usefully, “the desire-based reasons thesis” (Kagan 1992; Hubin 1999).⁸ To give a stock subjectivist example, your thirst—your basic, unmotivated desire for something to drink—gives you a practical reason to take the means to satisfy it, walking to the drinking fountain or to the soda machine, say. We might put the subjectivist's defining idea in this way. (I often will.) In the stock example, your thirst is “rationally potent”: it generates practical reasons. The desire, along with facts relevant to its satisfaction, is the source of practical reasons for you.

Cut at its joints, subjectivism is committed, alongside the desire-based reasons thesis, to a second tenet, an instrumental principle that communicates normativity from a (rationally potent) basic desire to the (effective) means to its satisfaction. Together, these two elements make up the “core elements” of the subjectivist theory.

Another characteristic of subjectivism—more difficult to define, but crucial to understanding this theory—is its theoretical modesty. Given its commitment to the desire-based reasons thesis, subjectivism regards practical reasons as agent-relative: the considerations relevant to answering the question “What, rationally speaking, should this particular agent do?” ultimately derive from among her own subjective, contingent, conative states—from

⁵ Similarly: “Some things are dear to our hearts. To act rationally . . . means in essence: to look after these things, as best we can” (Fehige 2001, 49.)

⁶ Frankfurt does gesture at the concept of a personal ideal (in the preface to *Necessity, Volition, and Love* 1999).

⁷ I don't deny there are also considerations in favor of desiring, feeling, or being a certain way. But I will speak of practical reasons as considerations in favor of acting.

⁸ Whether Williams himself is an advocate of the desire-based reasons thesis has been questioned. Dancy argues we should be careful to distinguish between the desire-based reasons thesis and Williams' internalism about practical reasons (2000, 18-19).

among her own whims, impulses, desires, wants, cares, intentions, pro-attitudes, and the like—and from nowhere else. Accordingly, subjectivism rejects any appeal to extra-subjectivist practical reasons or extra-subjectivist constraints upon practical reasons. That is, a subjectivist cannot regard any purported normative standard, whether a realist standard of objective worth, a robust Kantian rule of practical reason such as the Categorical Imperative, or some other standard, as rationally binding upon an agent regardless of what she happens to want.⁹ Subjectivists believe, as Hume puts it, that practical reason’s proper task—the only “office” to which it should “pretend”—is to “serve” ends the agent herself already desires.

Subjectivists often describe their view in the following way. When we ask an agent for a rational justification of his behavior, a chain of practical justifications properly “bottoms out” in an appeal to a basic desire, such as “because I was thirsty” or “because I care intrinsically about my child’s welfare.” In the subjectivist’s view, practical rationality doesn’t require that the agent have some further justification for why he should treat these basic desires as reason-giving. Motivational states such as these are the ultimate grounds of legitimate practical reasoning.

Subjectivism is sometimes considered the default position in theorizing about practical reasons (Nozick 1993, 133; Hubin 1996; Millgram 2001). It’s often touted as having a significant theoretical virtue. The agent-relative practical reasons it posits seem to have the compelling force we expect from practical reasons. Since according to subjectivism your practical reasons derive from among your own basic desires, you cannot “shrug off” these considerations; you can’t properly say you don’t care about, aren’t moved by, the perspective from which they are generated (Hubin 1996).

Critics sometimes object that subjectivism is overly simple, even crude. Admittedly, there is a reductionist strain within the subjectivist tradition. For example, some (famous) adherents of subjectivism seem to accept the view that all legitimate practical reasoning is instrumental in a very straightforward sense: “‘Reason’ has a perfectly clear and precise meaning. It signifies the choice of right means to an end you wish to achieve. It has nothing whatever to do with the choice of ends” (Russell 1954). But subjectivism isn’t by its very nature simplistic. More precisely, it isn’t committed to a simplistic model or conception of instrumental reasoning.

Here is what I have in mind. Subjectivism certainly treats the process of instrumental reasoning—identifying basic desires; seeking effective means—as the paradigm activity of practical reasoning. And when subjectivists provide illustrations, they generally appeal to what we might call “straightforward” or “garden-variety” examples of instrumental reasoning that seek out (i) causal, (ii) criteriological, or (iii) mereological means to already-desired ends: (i) being thirsty and seeking out behavior that will cause the thirst to go away, or (ii) wanting to run an officially-sponsored marathon and seeking out a race that meets the relevant criteria, or (iii) hoping to complete a particular twelve-step program and seeking out what the third step in the program actually requires (Hubin 1999).

There are, though, species of subjectivism that posit forms of practical reasoning that are

⁹ Except for the instrumental principle itself. If by ‘categorical imperative’ we mean a rule rationally binding upon an agent independent of the content of his contingent, subjective basic desires, the instrumental principle is such a principle (Dreier 2001). In my subjectivist view, even the principle of prudence gains whatever rational validity it happens to have for a person only and ultimately from her own basic desires, whether directly from her intrinsic concern for her own (long-term) welfare, indirectly from an instrumental need to take care of herself if she hopes to successfully pursue the satisfaction of her other (long-term) desired ends, or both (Hubin 1979).

desire-based but do not fit the profile suggested by the examples of causal, criterial, or mereological reasoning. For instance, Schmitz argues that some legitimate practical reasoning is “mauetic”: a matter not of finding right means to already-desired ends, but of seeking out and choosing new ends to desire (2001). Say you find yourself wanting but lacking a sense of meaning in your life, and you come to the belief—let’s assume justified and true—that this sense would come if only you were to have goals you care about intrinsically. You would thereby come to have a practical reason to seek out new goals—newly-desired ends—you can care about in this way. Since your choice of new basic desires is in the service of satisfying another basic desire (for a meaningful life), mauetic reasoning is agent-relative and desire-based, and Schmitz’s proposal coheres, deeply, with subjectivism. The ultimate source of the practical advice ‘choose a new end to desire’ is the voice of one of your basic desires (for a meaningful life), enlightened by (accurate, we’re assuming) reflections upon what it takes to satisfy it. Schmitz’s model of practical reasoning is, this is to say, more complex in structure than Russell’s. And *pace* Russell, not only can we reason about ends, subjectivists can countenance the belief that we can.

Likewise, my proposal suggests a structural complexity that is, against the historical grain, available to subjectivism: a form of “categorical” reasoning, the disenfranchising of basic desires that violate a cared-about personal ideal. A basic desire that violates an agent’s personal ideal doesn’t generate a practical reason that is “trumped,” or even “swamped,” by other practical reasons; the desire is, to tweak the Aristotelian John McDowell’s preferred terminology, “silenced” (1979).¹⁰ Since in my view it is the agent’s caring about the ideal that makes the ideal and whatever norms it includes normative for her, my proposal also posits a desire-based but non-garden-variety form of practical reasoning and so coheres, deeply, with the core elements of subjectivism.

Let’s turn to the puzzle as it presents itself in Frankfurt’s thinking. The perplexity arises very acutely there, and in a way that sometimes makes Frankfurt’s otherwise stable and consistent theoretical commitments waver.

3. Frankfurt’s Commitments

Frankfurt’s Subjectivist Commitments

The textual evidence strongly suggests that Frankfurt is a subjectivist. Frankfurt thinks there are rationally potent basic desires, such as your thirst. He accepts the theory-defining thesis about the ultimate source of practical reasons: all of them derive, ultimately, from among your own subjective, contingent basic desires. Frankfurt thinks there is, in the very least, a *standard*—or “default”—connection between having a basic desire and having a practical reason to take the means to satisfying it (2006, 8). Frankfurt’s metaphors are stock subjectivist; an agent’s practical reasoning is properly governed, he says, by her “heart” not by the “head,” and when it comes to deciding what to do “reason” is “in service of what we love” (2006, 3). He expresses a strong commitment to an agent-relative conception of practical reasons (2006, 33). And he explicitly rejects the central tenets of both Kantianism and realism. Frankfurt’s boisterousness comes through when he calls the Kantian and realist programs, each of them, a “will o’ the wisp,” motivated by the “pan-rationalist fantasy” that we are able to provide “an exhaustively rational warrant” for a conception of how people, all people, ought to conduct their lives (2004, 28). Similar to Hume, Frankfurt believes that if it happens to be rationally advisable for you to live a moral

¹⁰ For McDowell, a “silenced” consideration doesn’t even arise in the virtuous agent’s practical deliberation. In Frankfurt’s terminology, to say a desire is “silenced” is to say it is treated as unworthy of consideration.

life, this is true—not because practical reason, by its very nature, demands it, but—because living morally is called for by the ends you happen to care most about.

Frankfurt is, as I read him, a restless subjectivist, perturbed by the reductionist tendency in the Humean tradition, with a broad agenda to refine, and so to strengthen, the subjectivist theory. For example, subjectivism is sometimes associated with a “minimalist” theory of human psychology and a simple, straightforward belief-desire model of action. Frankfurt isn’t a minimalist, as he makes vividly clear in his characteristic rollicking style:

When philosophers or economists or others attempt to analyze the various structures and strategies of practical reasoning, they generally draw upon a more or less standard but nonetheless rather meager conceptual repertoire. Perhaps the most elementary as well as the most indispensable of these limited resources is the notion of what people *want*—or, synonymously (at least according to the somewhat procrustean convention that I shall adopt here), what they *desire*. This notion is rampantly ubiquitous. It is also heavily overburdened, and a bit limp. People routinely deploy it in a number of different roles, to refer to a disparate and unruly assortment of psychic conditions and events (2004, 10, emphasis his).

Frankfurt wants to do better.¹¹ He wants a less meager conceptual repertoire, a more subtle taxonomy of motivation. Much of his work over the past four decades has been an attempt to provide one.

Frankfurt’s most significant contributions to subjectivist theorizing are his discussions of caring about and loving.¹² According to Frankfurt, an agent’s will, her “practical point of view,” consists of complex motivational states with the normative authority to govern her practical deliberation and subsequent behavior. Though at times a mere desire—an afternoon’s urge to eat an ice cream cone, say—generates a final ‘ought’ of practical reason, an agent’s weightiest practical reasons often derive from among her “ruling passions.” For example, an unwilling drug addict, even if she is presently in the grips of an intense and causally very powerful urge to take heroin, ought not take the drugs. In the very least, she has a (far) weightier practical reason to frustrate her present urge in virtue of the fact that there are things she cares about that discourage or even forbid her from taking drugs. Frankfurt doesn’t generally specify what these things are, but presumably she cares about being in control of her own life, and so not in the grips of an addiction; being healthy, physically and financially; spending her time on her career or with her family, and not in sketchy locales. All of these considerations speak forcefully against satisfying her addiction. In Frankfurt’s general view, the normative weight of a practical reason is determined not, at the bottom level, by the felt intensity or causal power of the basic desire that generates it, but by its source. A practical reason produced by one of her ruling passions will generally carry significant weight. “Love,” Frankfurt tells us, “is a powerful source of reasons” (2006, 42).

¹¹ Millgram also structures his discussion of contemporary theorizing about practical reasoning by beginning with an exceedingly simple, subjectivist theory. He then categorizes various theorists as either complicating or rejecting one or another feature of this very simple theory. This is a useful framework (2001).

¹² For Frankfurt, ‘caring about’ and ‘love’ are technical terms. To care about a person is to desire her welfare, to be “satisfied” with so desiring, and to see yourself as being given strong practical reasons to advance her welfare. To love someone is to care about her, inescapably: to be unwilling to oppose the requirements caring about her places on you, when this unwillingness is itself something which you are unwilling to alter. Frankfurt discusses this concept in a number of articles. See, for instance, ‘Autonomy, Necessity, and Love’ (1999; also 2004).

For his four-decade subjectivist project, Herman describes Frankfurt—aptly, I think—as one of the “premier modern practitioners” of “theoretically abstemious bootstrapping” (253). In bootstrapping,

you use a little of what you already have to get some place you haven’t been before, but need to go. As a strategy of argument, it is environmentally neutral. No new resources—new entities or capacities—are called for; little of what you start with is wasted . . . The bootstrap is made of the same basic materials, only attached in a different place, so as to provide additional elements of argument. The idea is to provide just enough leverage in the argument to give a better account of the complexity (2002, 253).

Frankfurt has attempted to bootstrap his way to an account of the human will. He wants to account for common intuitions, such as the intuition that the unwilling addict has a weightier practical reason not to satisfy her intensely felt, causally powerful addictive impulse, by appealing to a theoretically modest conception of the will that construes the will as a set of complex motivational states, which practical reason ought, especially, to serve. In Frankfurt’s view, though basic desires are, when the standard or default conditions hold, rationally potent, the vantage point from which the agent’s weightiest practical reasons generally derive is defined in terms of the agent’s cares and loves. These are the considerations that the agent can’t, on pains of practical irrationality, “shrug off.”

Clearly, Frankfurt doesn’t want a theory so modest it can’t account for the intuition that human beings are agents who sometimes play an active role in determining their own behavior. As reflective creatures, we aren’t, Frankfurt believes, invariably and merely “pushed around by conflicting psychological forces” (Cohon 2000, 64); we sometimes act, properly speaking. Frankfurt’s long-standing view is that when a person behaves on the basis of a desire with which she “identifies,” her behavior is, in a deep sense, her own. Frankfurt goes to great pains to develop an abstemious account of “identification with a desire” that construes “identification” in terms of higher order desires with which the agent is “satisfied,” where being satisfied with a desire *D* consists in the absence of any persistent desire or intention to stop desiring *D*. Frankfurt emphasizes that being satisfied, in his view, doesn’t essentially involve any judgments of objective worth. In this way, Frankfurt wants to make do without appealing to any “new resources—new entities or capacities,” by “attaching” the “same basic materials”—desires, intentions, and the like—“in a different place.”

Frankfurt’s abstemiousness is also on display when he explicitly criticizes anti-subjectivist proposals that attempt to account for the idea that some (satisfiable) basic desires don’t generate any practical reasons. Cohon thinks that a desire to stick your finger in goo would not, even could not, generate any practical reason for anyone because this messy behavior has (she believes) absolutely no objective value (2000, 63). Wolf argues for (what she takes to be) a more “modest” form of normative realism, according to which basic desire doesn’t generate a practical reason if the object of the desire has objective disvalue. In her view, bizarre but trivial and morally unobjectionable desires—such as the desire to stick your finger in goo, perhaps—generate practical reasons, but vengeful impulses and petty envy are rationally impotent. Some moral standards, she thinks, operate as rationally-binding norms of rational impotence (2002, 227-244). Frankfurt raises the standard subjectivist objection to these realist proposals: these proposals are guilty, as he puts, of “one thought

too many” (2006, 36-39).¹³ Chains of practical reasoning properly bottom out, Frankfurt here stresses, in an appeal to our desired ends, which are the ultimate “touchstone” of our practical reasoning. In his positive theorizing, Frankfurt is adamant that a beloved child has value to his mother because she loves him. It is her caring about him, Frankfurt declares, that “creates” his value to her. And he insists, over and over, that nothing in the world is inherently valuable. Things take on value *for us* because we care about them (2006, 36-39). Bottom out, indeed.

This litany of theoretical commitments represents, I submit, the mind of a theoretically abstemious subjectivist, however restless, at work.

Frankfurt’s Seemingly Unsubjectivist Remarks

For all the depth and width of his subjectivist commitments, Frankfurt avows, repeatedly and emphatically, the existence of basic desires—motivational states, “elements of S”—that don’t generate any practical reasons whatsoever. Though in accordance with subjectivism Frankfurt accepts that there’s a standard connection between having a basic desire and having a practical reason to satisfy it, he thinks that this regular link is, in some instances, severed. In such cases, there is a basic desire, an adequate means to its satisfaction, and yet no practical reason—no *pro tanto* consideration—to take this or any means because the desire, in Frankfurt’s view, does not “deserve a voice.” In this case, the agent should “silence” the basic desire, “extrude” it “entirely” from the context of decision making.¹⁴

Frankfurt accepts, we might say, “the Occasional Rational Impotence Thesis” (ORIT), the claim that there are some “rationally impotent” basic desires.¹⁵ The unwilling addict’s present and very intense desire to take heroin is sometimes regarded as Frankfurt’s canonical example of a rationally impotent basic desire.¹⁶ More recently, Frankfurt has proposed another, very similar to Watson’s: he imagines finding in himself a murderous impulse against his own beloved son (2006, 10-13).

Clarifying Remarks

There is significant discussion in the philosophical literature about how readers should interpret Frankfurt’s examples. Let me be clear about how I will.

First, I assume ‘to silence a desire’ doesn’t mean to deny its existence, or even to attempt to. For one, to regard a desire as rationally impotent, you have to, at some level, think it exists. Moreover, we can imagine cases in which a person both silences a desire and is under no illusion about either its existence or its content. An unwilling drug addict, weary of her addiction, might be all too familiar with it. Far from ignoring her addiction, she

¹³ Williams provides the most famous arguments against anti-subjectivism, namely, arguments against subjectivism posit extra-subjectivist practical reasons, or extra-subjectivist constraints on practical reasons, that are “heavy-handed, dogmatic, and unconvincing” (2001). When Frankfurt criticizes anti-subjectivist proposals, he seems to accept Williams’ broad critique. Frankfurt also, as you can see, employs Williams’ well-known ‘one-thought-too-many’ phrase. That said, Frankfurt changes the meaning of this phrase; in Frankfurt’s argument, this phrase expresses the idea that an agent’s basic desire does not need to be endorsed by, say, a realist standard of objective worth to have normative validity for her. Williams uses the phrase to exonerate a husband who, when presented with the opportunity to save his wife’s life, doesn’t happen to consider whether his behavior is justifiable, when he could have saved the lives of other people instead.

¹⁴ Frankfurt (2006, 11-14) shares a political metaphor with Kant (1785, 21).

¹⁵ Frankfurt generalizes: rationally impotent basic desires are, statistically speaking, relatively uncommon; most of the vast number of desires that well up in the common run of life “attach to a moving principle within” the agent. That said, he thinks rationally impotent basic desires exist (2006, 8).

¹⁶ See ‘Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person’ and ‘Identification and Externality’ (1988). Frankfurt doesn’t, though, invariably employ the case of the unwilling drug addict as an example of a person treating a desire as rationally impotent.

might believe herself to have a very strong reason to keep a wary eye on this “outlaw,” on the grounds close attention will help her defeat it. Accordingly, in my discussion, ‘to silence a desire’ means—nothing more and nothing less than—to treat the desire as undeserving of a positive voice in the decision-making process. This behavior doesn’t, by its very nature, involve self-delusion, as some commentators have worried.¹⁷

Second, I assume Frankfurt stipulates that the psychological state he confronts—what he calls his “murderous impulse”—is a *basic, unmotivated* desire (that is, a desire that isn’t generated by another desire through a process of instrumental reasoning).¹⁸ Of course, philosophical examples are often initially under-described, and the example of the loving father certainly admits of other interpretations. We could imagine that the father is mistaken about his mental state. Perhaps his son has been frustratingly argumentative, and what the father wants, in a basic way, is peace and quiet, in which case his urge to shoot his son is nothing more than a derived desire, grounded in a recognition that shooting the boy is an expedient, though ghastly, means to (short-term!) peace and quiet. Or perhaps the father’s psychological state is merely a passing thought, not a motivational state. An image of shooting his son has presented itself to the father’s mind’s eye. Horrified by the image, the father experiences a visceral feeling—a sense of agitation—not altogether distinct from the feelings that often accompany unsatisfied motivational states. The father subsequently throws a label—the wrong label—at the experience: “I feel an impulse to kill my son.”

But if we interpret Frankfurt’s example in either of these two ways (or several others¹⁹), then the troublesome puzzle slips through our fingers. On these interpretations, the case simply doesn’t pose a serious theoretical question for subjectivism generally or for Frankfurt’s abstemious but non-reductivist subjectivist theorizing. A basic desire for peace and quiet is not, on anyone’s theory, rationally objectionable; the best rational advice to give the father would be to seek out a less costly means—such as ‘walk out of the room’—to his perfectly acceptable end. And if the mental state is a daydream and not a desire, the subjectivist theory isn’t committed to giving it any reason-giving power; whatever objections should be levied at this nightmarish vision, these objections aren’t objections to the core elements of subjectivism.

It’s only if we imagine the father’s violent impulse to be a basic desire that the perplexity arises. The unusual element in the thought experiment, what is supposed to stick out in our minds, is the distressing urge and its normative status. Frankfurt is pressing his reader to accept ORIT on the strength of this case:

The fact that shooting him is likely to kill him gives me *no reason at all* to shoot him, even though it is true that I have a desire to kill him and shooting him might do the trick (2006, emphasis his).

Accordingly, Frankfurt says his distressing mental state is not merely desire-like, sharing some but not the defining features of a desire; the lethal impulse is, as he puts it, a “real”

¹⁷ There’s a cottage industry of articles that argue Frankfurt misunderstands his own examples. Velleman objects to Frankfurt’s theory that there are “external” desires on the grounds that it endorses a “common defensive strategy” that is mentally unhealthy. To extrude an objectionable desire, Velleman thinks, is an act of wishful thinking, aimed at ignoring parts of ourselves we don’t happen to like (2002). For similar views, see Thalberg (1989) and Arpaly and Schroeder (1999).

¹⁸ See footnote #1.

¹⁹ There are more. First, the father’s thought that his urge gives him no reason to kill his child could be construed as merely performative: he might be assuring his spouse, or himself, he won’t be acting on the impulse. Or second, he might be weakening the impulse: denying it reason-giving authority might strip it of some of its causal potency. Even if the claim “the impulse generates no reasons” were false, thinking it true might be a very effective tactic.

desire.

With these two points clarified, Frankfurt's target becomes clearer. He's challenging a penchant within the Humean tradition to rely exclusively on the "trumping model." According to this model, all (satisfiable) basic desires generate practical reasons and the real work of practical reasoning is the work—sometimes hard, sometimes easy—of weighing competing practical reasons to figure out which practical reason is the final 'ought' of rational advice. Frankfurt, though, simply isn't worried about what the father ultimately ought to do. Obviously, all things considered, the father ought to take his finger off the trigger. Even on standard subjectivist grounds, the case against the violent urge, taken as a candidate for satisfaction, is ridiculously over-determined. On plausible assumptions about what the father cares about—again, Frankfurt doesn't explicitly say—there are myriad and weighty considerations that speak against killing his son; to name a few: since he doesn't want to go jail; since he doesn't want to feel the shame and guilt that would overwhelm him if he were to commit murder; since he doesn't want to meet face-to-face, after the event, with a wife who is enraged, baffled, and grieving desperately. And from the father's own perspective, the most important voice speaking against pulling the trigger is his love for his son. He wants his children to flourish; killing his son won't serve this strongly-desired end.

In summary, Frankfurt's pulling the trigger would rob his son, we are to presume, of a valuable and much-desired future and would rob Frankfurt of a much-desired future shared with him. Frankfurt means for his example to point to a perfectly ordinary and caring parent, with an (otherwise) healthy relationship with his son. What's at stake is whether subjectivism is committed to assimilating this case, and all such cases, to the trumping model, the model which subjectivists generally employ. Frankfurt, I conclude, wants subjectivism to appeal to the "silencing model," even though, historically speaking, this is a thesis far more often trumpeted by Kantians and realists.

4. Why is This Puzzle Especially Difficult for a Subjectivist to Solve?

At this point, we can state very forcefully the perplexity Frankfurt's theorizing confronts, what it is and what it's not.

Frankfurt isn't guilty of a logical contradiction. The core elements of subjectivism, as I construe them, don't logically commit subjectivists to the thesis that all (satisfiable) basic desires generate practical reasons. The desire-based reasons thesis states that every practical reason ultimately derives from a basic desire. This, by itself, entails that *only* basic desires generate practical reasons, but not that *all* basic desires generate them. If subjectivists, as a group, are compelled to reject ORIT and be indiscriminately universalistic about the rational potency of (satisfiable) basic desires, it will have to be further considerations, beyond the core elements, that logically forces them into this view.

What Frankfurt's theory suffers from is a lacuna. For all his good work, Frankfurt hasn't provided a satisfactory account of what makes rationally impotent basic desires rationally impotent.²⁰ To Frankfurt's credit, ORIT is plausible. People find themselves impelled to do some very strange things, and some things more awful than strange. Personally, I'm not convinced everyone would find a desire to stick a finger in goo rationally impotent; there is, about it, something wondrously antagonistic to bourgeois standards of cleanliness. But many a parent would share Frankfurt's intuition that his murderous impulse, as it clamors 'Kill the boy, Kill the boy,' shouldn't merely be "muffled" but "silenced," "extruded,"

²⁰ It's more accurate to say Frankfurt hasn't settled, decisively, on an account. He gestures at answers (1988, 168).

“disenfranchised,” given no positive voice whatsoever in the process of deciding what to do. Frankfurt is certainly gesturing at a phenomenon crying out for theoretical understanding. But Frankfurt hasn’t indicated how the will, construed in his abstemious way, has the capacity to disenfranchise basic desires. What exactly is supposed to do the normative work of disenfranchising, of ruling out the father’s violent impulse in some sense “categorically”? None of the considerations against pulling the trigger mentioned so far, not even those I’ve added to the thought experiment, are able to do that. They each operate as straightforward, garden-variety instrumental considerations. It is because Frankfurt wants freedom from incarceration, from his wife’s wrath, and from the loss of his son that he ought to put down the gun. Holding his finger steady is the best way, the most effective means, to save Frankfurt and his family a lot of loss and heartache.

And it wouldn’t really help to appeal to Frankfurt’s idea that some of the father’s desires are “cares” or “loves.” A mere appeal to the father’s desire for his son’s welfare gives him a garden-variety instrumental reason not to act upon the impulse, or even an instrumental reason to eradicate the desire, not a reason to regard it as rationally impotent and so “extrude” it “entirely.” If caring about is a complex motivational state, a set of desires, then what we have is a case of desires (ruling passions) in competition with other desires (impulses), which, it seems, is to be handled by a trumping model.²¹ So, however much Frankfurt’s account of caring about and loving help subjectivism to overcome some challenges—the objections to minimalism, for instance—it isn’t sufficient by itself to resolve his long-standing puzzle.

What is needed for the disenfranchisement, the “categorical” rejection, of a basic desire, it seems, is something with a different “shape” than another desire—something such as a norm or a rule or a set of criteria, something with a deontic character, which a basic desire could conceivably violate, or perhaps a procedure or a test that a basic desire could be put through and conceivably fail. These are the kinds of things realists and constructivists often offer, and Frankfurt explicitly rejects.

Clearly, if Frankfurt is to stay consistent with his subjectivist commitments and to escape, in his theorizing, his own “one thought too many” objection, he can’t mean by ‘categorical’ all that Kant does. The type of “categorical rational criticism” he advocates must be a form of desire-based, agent-relative criticism, which “bottoms out” in an appeal to a basic desire. So what, if anything, can be said about this seemingly unprecedented and paradoxical-sounding type of rational criticism—Hume-style, desire-based, categorical rational criticism?

To solve this puzzle, a change in argumentative strategy is called for. What Frankfurt needs is not merely more conceptual analysis, but a good ear for practical anthropology: a sensitive appraisal of the substantive content of some of the personal ideals flesh-and-blood human agents aspire to exemplify. My own proposal doesn’t merely attach “old material”—such as a higher-order desire—in “a new place.” It teases out the norms agents with personal ideals sometimes, in the run of life, confront.

5. A Theoretically Modest Proposal

I’ve suggested there are instances in which an agent ought, as a matter of practical rationality, to disenfranchise a basic desire in virtue of a personal ideal he cares about. The

²¹ This is a new twist on an old objection by Watson (1982).

term ‘personal ideal’ is more suggestive than clear, and part of my task is to clarify what I do (not) mean by it. One remark, to start: I regard a personal ideal as a normative standard that generates substantive practical advice. Some personal ideals are very complex. A personal ideal might answer a wide array of practical questions about how (not) to behave, how (not) to weigh practical reasons (against each other), how (not) to feel, and what character traits (not) to foster.

Consider, for instance, the case of a loving parent. At the heart of a loving parent’s love is her desire for her child’s welfare, and this ruling passion makes demands upon her. Behavioral demands: she ought to feed and clothe her child. And volitional demands: she ought to treat the fact that a course of action will significantly benefit her child as, in the very least, a significant practical reason to do it. A ruling passion might also call for the adoption of personal guidelines. For instance, a loving parent who consistently loses patience with her children, or who sometimes finds herself resentful of her children, might decide to adopt a maxim “Be more patient” or “Pay more attention to the good things that come from having children.” As I see it, these guidelines are properly incorporated into her own practical point of view, into her will. The voice of her love deserves a privileged seat at the table, with the practical authority—in some cases—to demand that the agent make significant changes in behavior, volition, and character and that the agent adopt maxims to help her pursue one of her ultimate goals, helping her children flourish. As Frankfurt puts it, “Love makes demands.”

As for Frankfurt’s own example of a loving father, there could be, alongside his concern for the welfare of his family, an additional desired end at stake. If we take the father to be a normal (contemporary, western) parent, he likely has an abundance of concerns; among them, he might care about what kind of person to be. Frankfurt’s example is thinly described, and I’ve already been thickening it, but in directions that don’t help. Let me build more in, in a direction that will. Let’s say that father wants to be a good, or at least a decent, parent; he has, it is natural to say, a personal ideal of parenting. Having confronted his violent impulse, we could easily imagine him saying, “I can’t treat my impulse as reason-giving. Not as a father.” The father’s judgment that his violent impulse is rationally impotent reflects that he thinks it is inconsistent with his role as a parent to treat violent impulses as reason-giving. A good father wouldn’t, and he wants to be a good father. In this way, he is treating his ideal of parenting as normative for him. He thinks this ideal should shape not only what he does, but how he goes about making practical decisions. According to my proposal, such “norms of rational impotence” are elements of some personal ideals.

The easy part of my proposal is to describe what a norm of rational impotence is, at least functionally. For conceptual reasons, divide the process of practical deliberation into two stages: practical reasons are first collected, then subsequently weighed or otherwise compared, in an attempt to determine what ought to be done, all things considered. A norm of rational impotence is relevant to the first stage; it is a rule for the collection of practical reasons, a rule that requires an agent to treat certain basic desires as rationally impotent.²² In my neo-Humean subjectivist theory, the standard or default connection between having a basic desire and having a practical reason to take the means to its satisfaction is defeasible, and a norm of rational impotence operates as a defeater. It strips a basic desire of the capacity to generate practical reasons and thereby short-circuits the standard process

²² Bratman also discusses treating a desire as reason-giving, and of decisions not to (1999, 2002).

by which practical reasons are created.²³ Otherwise put, my theory claims that there are “factors” relevant to practical deliberation that have a different shape than practical reasons. Discussions of practical reasons are replete with useful metaphors. A standard way of thinking about a practical reason is a gram weight on a scale: “I have a reason to X, but a weightier reason to Y.” A norm of rational impotence functions differently. It isn’t a consideration in favor of doing something; it renders, for an agent, certain basic desires incapable of generating a consideration in favor of doing something.²⁴

The central move in my argument is easy to miss. Here it is. Once we recognize there are agents who care about complex personal ideals that include, among other things, norms of rational impotence, there isn’t any compelling reason to exclude these norms, as a class, from the agent’s practical point of view. They acquire normative authority—they “get into the agent’s will”—in the same way as the mother’s maxim to be more patient. The voice of a cared-about personal ideal, such as an ideal of parenthood, speaks, making demands about how the parent ought (not) to treat his children, about how he ought (not) to feel about his children, and about what maxims to adopt.²⁵ This voice has the practical authority to dictate how an agent is to think through his practical decisions in manifold ways. Why not, then, about how he collects practical reasons?

Initial Questions

It’s natural for a reader to have questions about my account of personal ideals. I’ll attempt to anticipate and briefly address a few of these questions.

How, for instance, does my proposal fit into the contemporary literature on practical reasoning? The concept of a personal ideal is discussed, though sometimes under a different title. Various philosophers posit practical reasons grounded in an agent’s “normative self-conceptions” or “practical identities” (Copp 2005, 22; Nagel 1970; Parfit 1996; Korsgaard 1996; Sen 1999; Hubin 2003). For instance, Korsgaard, a contemporary Kantian, thinks that an agent’s “practical identities” are (commonly) a legitimate source of practical advice:

A century ago a European could admonish another to civilized behavior by telling him to act like a Christian. It is still true in many quarters that courage is urged on males by the injunction ‘be a man!’ Duties more obviously connected with social roles are of course enforced in this way. ‘A psychiatrist doesn’t violate the confidence of her patients’. No ‘ought’ is needed here because the normativity is built right into the role (1994).

What’s unique about my proposal isn’t, in other words, my appeal to the concept of a personal ideal (whatever we choose to call it). Nor is it that I appeal to “norms of rational impotence” (Raz 1975; Cohon 2000; Wolfe 2002). What’s new is my emphasis upon the idea that personal ideals sometimes provide practical advice about how (not) to collect practical reasons; even more, it’s my claim that such ideals (and their associated norms) are sometimes the objects of an agent’s ruling passions and are thereby incorporated into

²³ Shemmer, a subjectivist, accepts ORIT but doesn’t appeal to a defeater account (2007).

²⁴ Raz discusses “exclusionary reasons”: “second-order reasons” that exclude from practical deliberation a “fact” (such as “I desire X”) that, absent the exclusionary reason, would generate a (*pro tanto*) practical reason (1975).

²⁵ Subjectivists should also adopt, I think, a qualification to the instrumental principle. There are “illicit means”: an agent might have legitimate grounds not to take the effective means to one of his rationally potent desired ends because the means is rendered “ineligible” by one of his personal ideals: “a good mother cannot kill her beloved child, even if she has wants to succeed financially and has a large insurance policy on her child.” Here the relevant basic desire is rationally potent, but the effective means is categorically ruled out by the strictures of her cared-about personal ideal.

the agent's will. In summary, my proposal applies a contemporary idea, the concept of a personal ideal, to an old subjectivist puzzle in a novel way.

Is my proposal in any sense *ad hoc*? I don't think so. Though the mere conceptual possibility an agent might have a cherished personal ideal with a norm of rational impotence would suffice to render ORIT logically consistent with subjectivism, I want to suggest that my proposal has independent theoretical value: it gestures at a powerful way of analyzing certain "real-life" modes of practical reasoning. To argue for this, I need to paint a plausible picture of how some people "bump into" norms of rational impotence in the run of life. As I see it, we have a natural tendency to treat our basic desires as reason-giving. This is part of what makes the striking cases so striking: these cases call into question this common tendency. I treat my thirst as a reason to walk to the water fountain, my hankering for ice cream as a reason to go to the grocery store, my desire for my son's welfare as a reason to feed and to clothe him. Then I find in myself a violent impulse to harm him—and I recoil at it. This is the momentarily mortifying experience that raises the salient question, present inchoately in everyday deliberation, about whether all (basic) desires are reason-giving. And at least in some cases, I propose, the agent with a shocking and disconcerting desire finds the desire shocking, disconcerting, and rationally impotent in virtue of a personal ideal she wants to live up to.

How determinate are personal ideals? There are cases, I think, in which the content of a personal ideal is clear, even codified. As Korsgaard suggests, a person who wants to be a good psychiatrist will find some of the rules of proper conduct written in the relevant documents published by the American Psychiatric Association, or widely promulgated in discussions with other practitioners: 'A psychiatrist doesn't violate the confidence of his patients'. But in other cases, an agent operates with a (more or less specific) mental picture of what an exemplar of the ideal is like, and confronts norms of rational impotence in reflection upon, or imagination of, what an exemplar would do. For instance, a devoted Christian reared in a community that preaches God intends to redeem human beings in the fullness of time, to make them more Christ-like, might internalize a conception of Christ, a mental picture of Jesus, that implicitly includes norms of rational impotence. Impulses that Christ would not have—because they are sinful—are to be treated as rationally impotent.²⁶ If Christ would not feel pure vengeance, because it isn't neighbor-loving, his followers, striving to be more and more neighbor-loving, should treat whatever impulses of pure vengeance they happen to experience as rationally impotent. In Christian thinking, the idea is that a person can recognize the sinfulness of a desire, take a stand against it (no delusion here), begin to work against it, and hope for its eventual eradication through God's redeeming grace. An early step in this process of becoming Christ-like is to strip the sinful desire of, if not existence, reason-giving status. Likewise, many (though not all) moral ideals implicitly include norms of rational impotence. It's common for morally committed people to think morality cares not only about overt behavior, but also about internal characteristics: character, virtue, intentions, and motivation. It wouldn't be surprising to find a pacifist, for instance, who wants to model peace not only in his behavior, but also in his heart and who is therefore unwilling to treat a basic desire for pure vengeance as the source of a practical reason to strike back.

What function does having a cherished personal ideal play in rational agency? Adopting a personal ideal might have important practical benefits. A personal ideal that is clear and determinate serves to orient an agent in normative space, giving him substantive

²⁶ Penelhum provides a similar account (2000).

practical advice about how to govern his own conduct and deliberation. This practical benefit isn't, though, guaranteed. An extraordinarily complex, highly disputed, or unduly vague personal ideal could thrust an agent into difficult normative perplexities instead of helping him deliberate with greater conviction or ease. For several reasons, it can be very difficult to specify the content of a personal ideal. It might be complex; as mentioned, a personal ideal could include practical advice about behavior, volition, feeling, and character. The content of a personal ideal, such as an ideal of parenthood, could also be a matter of (protracted and serious) dispute, intrapersonal or interpersonal: one person thinks that a good parent spans, another is repelled by the idea; in some moments, you think a parent ought to pay for a college education, in others that it is beyond the call. Also, many personal ideals are, in terms of content, vague or indefinite—to varying degrees.²⁷ The complexity, disputability, and indeterminacy of personal ideals might go some way in explaining why it is that my proposal hasn't previously been recognized or developed. To describe personal ideals requires sensitive practical anthropology, not merely analytic distinction-making, generally the purview of philosophers.

A skeptic might wonder whether my proposal gives an agent's cared-about personal ideals more normative authority than they warrant.²⁸ It had better not. We could easily imagine an agent who treats as normative a harmful (or otherwise rationally inadvisable) personal ideal. Say a person without natural athleticism takes on the daily routine of a striving and ambitious jock and suffers under the weight of his (predictable) failures. Wouldn't it be better, we might wonder, if he didn't treat this high athletic ideal and its demands—its guidelines and norms of rational impotence—as normative for him?

How would my account address such a case? To this particular question, I would respond in the standard way subjectivists do. If the personal ideal places demands upon him that make it either impossible or exceedingly difficult for him to fulfill other ends that he cares about, or even cares about more, this would generate a strong practical reason for him to reject the relevant personal ideal, or to significantly weaken its demands on him. On the other hand, if an agent cares about a personal ideal and, from the perspective of his other ruling passions, it is rationally advisable for the agent to continue to treat the ideal as normative—some of his ruling passions favor it, none speak significantly against it—then it would be rational for the agent to submit to the personal ideal's requirements. If that personal ideal also includes norms of rational impotence, they will be, according to my account, valid for him, too. One of the reasons that Watson and Frankfurt appeal to cases that involve loving parents, I suspect, is that it is natural for us to assume that loving parents regard their roles as parents as having an especially high priority, and they are willing to submit to its demands whatever other cares and loves they have.

6. Taking Stock

My proposal, if correct, solves one old puzzle in Frankfurt's theorizing. More generally, it indicates that subjectivism, contrary to how it is often represented, can countenance at least one form of "categorical" rational criticism, the disenfranchisement of basic desires. This could be polemically useful for subjectivists: were any realists or Kantians to challenge subjectivism by appealing to ORIT, my proposal could help blunt the challenge.²⁹

²⁷ In response to these issues, I think some practical reasoning consists in specifying the content of a personal ideal. It's often necessary, if a person is to live up to a personal ideal, to find ways to make more determinate the very general or vague practical advice it gives (Bratman 2002).

²⁸ This is a common objection to Korsgaard's account, an objection, when directed at her, I agree with.

²⁹ There are intimations of this objection in, among other places, Scanlon 1988 and Korsgaard 1994.

All this said, a reader might wonder why my proposal—allegedly so “simple”—hasn’t already been broached. I think there are several explanations.³⁰ But with respect to this article’s central arguments, the most salient explanation is that Frankfurt has consistently conflated two types of desire “extrusion.” I’ve indicated how Frankfurt, consistent with subjectivism, could analyze cases in which a basic desire is, in his view, properly “extruded” from the context of practical deliberation, cases in which the relevant desire fails, he thinks, to generate any practical reason for the agent. But Frankfurt sometimes speaks of another form of desire “extrusion,” and this second type of desire extrusion raises new puzzles for Frankfurt’s four-decade project.

Let me explain. Several times, Frankfurt says “identification with a desire” is an action-type “fundamental to any philosophy of action,” and that the act of identification is an “elementary maneuver of the will,” which brings an agent’s will, his practical point of view, into existence (1999, 103; 2006, 4).³¹ Perhaps Frankfurt is thinking of this type of example. In the run of life, Sam finds in himself two new conations: a desire to take up biking, and a desire not to. He is attracted in a basic way both to a life with, and to a life without, a biking habit. Let’s suppose Sam’s ruling passions, the things he already cares about, don’t give him any reason to prefer one new desire to the other: his life would be equally enjoyable with or without the new hobby; he’s busy, but not so busy that he can’t carve out a bit of time for weekly biking. More than that, his ruling passions don’t happen to give him a decisive reason to settle this internal competition: the decision ‘Take on the hobby or no?’ is on his mind these days, but it isn’t unsettling him; it’s not costing him any happiness, any significant time, or any significant mental energy. To sum up the decision before him, to resolve his internal dispute, Sam will have to plunk for one desire or the other; but he could also, without being irrational, let the internal debate continue for the time being. His practical point of view simply doesn’t speak in favor of one route or the other, or even in favor of settling the dispute.

Say Sam happens to go in for biking. He “identifies with” his desire to become a biker. Accordingly, he buys the necessary equipment; carves out time in his schedule; forms the intention to spend a few hours a week pedaling; and begins acting on that intention. Focus on Sam’s act of identification: his choice for the one desire and against the other. This choice was, we might say, a “brute opting.” Sam simply “maneuvered his will.” He made one desire the desired ends he intends to pursue—what Frankfurt calls a “goal”—whereas his anti-biking desire remains a “mere desire.” By this choice, the anti-biking desire is, in one sense, “extruded”: it is excluded from his will, his practical point of view, which consists of—Frankfurt seems to be saying—his “goals,” cares, and loves.

³⁰ Frankfurt’s progress has been obstructed by an unhelpful analogy. Frankfurt sometimes analyzes the loving father’s violent impulse as the conative analogue of obsessional thoughts. Bizarre desires and obsessional thoughts often strike us as inexplicable, “out of the blue.” This prompts Frankfurt to characterize “extruded desires” as “reckless impulses” and “hot surges of anarchic emotion” that should be considered “mental ties, twitches, and convulsions” (2006). But, first, these descriptions don’t really fit all of the relevant cases. As I construe her, the unwilling addict isn’t uncertain of her addictive impulse’s etiology; she has a very plausible (albeit sketchy and folk-psychological) explanation: she began taking drugs, and drugs are addictive. Moreover, there isn’t any conceptual connection between treating a basic desire as rationally impotent and being unsure of its causal origins. The devoted pacifist could know the evolutionary explanation for the etiology of his vengeful impulse and yet regard it as rationally impotent.

³¹ Treating a basic desire as rationally impotent in virtue of a cared-about personal ideal is not a fundamental concept in my theory of rational agency; it’s a form of desire-based rational criticism. A norm of rational impotence is a fundamental concept in the sense that you can’t analyze it by reducing it to beliefs and desires—a norm of rational impotence is a rule (for collecting reasons), not a belief or a desire. But the justification for treating the norm as normative is that it is grounded in a basic desire.

Sam's "extrusion" of his anti-biking desire, we should carefully note, is a different act of will than the unwilling drug addict's disenfranchisement of her addictive desire. At least in my stipulated analysis, the addict silences her impulse on the grounds that a ruling passion, a cherished personal ideal, calls for the clamorous impulse to be treated as rationally impotent. Accordingly, she categorically rejects it. By hypothesis, Sam doesn't regard his anti-biking desire as condemned by a ruling passion. He simply chooses not to make it one of his goals. If Frankfurt were to call Sam's brute opting an "extrusion" of his anti-biking desire, then we would have yet another type of "extruded desire": a desire that loses out, in the competition to become a "goal," to another desire.

My proposal, though it renders Frankfurt's endorsements of ORIT consistent with his subjectivist commitments, simply doesn't speak to Frankfurt's conception of extruding desires from the will by way of a brute opting. This second type of desire extrusion raises, it turns out, new questions about Frankfurt's subjectivist credentials. Can a clear-headed subjectivist admit the existence of legitimate, will-creating brute optings? Initially, it might seem not. If Frankfurt regards Sam's brute opting as normative, this seems tantamount to denying that legitimate chains of practical justification always, in every case, "bottom out" in an appeal, and only in an appeal, to a basic desire. Sam's chain of practical justification for his biking habit appeals not only to the existence of basic desires but to a brute act of will: "I simply aligned myself with one desire and not the other." Though Sam's brute opting doesn't itself generate practical reasons, this claim does give a non-desire-based act of will the normative authority to shape what an agent ought to do, rationally speaking. Then again, perhaps it's a bit much to say that Frankfurt is, if he accepts this view, no longer a subjectivist. The thesis that Sam's brute opting helps to "create" Sam's will does share subjectivism's theoretical modesty. This idea, though it has a constructivist lilt,³² isn't realist; it's not an appeal to a robustly Kantian conception of practical reason; and it doesn't seem to be subject to a Frankfurt-style, "one thought too many" objection. Sam's practical reasons—to buy a bike, carve out time, and so on—are grounded, partly, in his desire to have his hobby, and so desires are still doing significant normative work here.

I haven't solved this newly-identified puzzle in Frankfurt's theorizing. But—here's the important point—we needn't solve it to add the useful concept of personal ideals to subjectivist thinking.

³² As does Frankfurt's remarks at 2006, 8-11.

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