

ON THE RATIONAL IMPOTENCE OF URGES

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Can a Humean subjectivist – someone who believes that all our practical reasons are ultimately grounded in our desires – accommodate the intuition that certain of our basic (i.e., ultimate or non-instrumental) desires should have no weight at all in practical deliberation? Consider Harry Frankfurt’s example of a loving father who finds himself with a sudden, unmotivated “murderous impulse” against his beloved son (2006, 12). We are inclined to say, intuitively – and Frankfurt agrees – that such a desire would provide the father with *no reason at all* to murder his son: it is “rationally impotent”. The father would be making a serious mistake were he to treat the murderous impulse as having any normative weight whatsoever: it should be “extruded”, “disenfranchised” or “silenced” in practical reasoning.

In his article in this journal, Regan Lance Reitsma accepts such intuitions about the “rational impotence” of some desires at face value, but doubts that Harry Frankfurt’s well-developed subjectivist view can properly account for them (2013). Frankfurt wants to maintain both, on the one hand, the subjectivist claim that all our practical reasons are explained by our basic desires and, on the other, the realist-sounding claim that some basic desires are rationally impotent (as in cases like an addict’s strong desire for heroin, or of the loving father who experiences an impulse to kill his son). Although these claims are not logically inconsistent, there is a certain tension between them, since their combination raises the question: Why do some desires ground practical reasons, while others do not?

Frankfurt is, of course, well-known for making distinctions between different kinds of desires. In particular he is known for having developed an account of *freedom of the will* in terms of higher-order desires (desires to desire), according to which I act freely when I act on a desire that I identify with (i.e., I have a higher-order desire that I act on the first-order desire, and I am satisfied with the higher-order desire, in the sense that I lack any inclination to change it). Frankfurt explains our caring and loving as essentially consisting in diachronic, reflective, higher-order desires of this kind, and identifies these as the sources of our weightiest practical reasons (1971; 2006). However, Reitsma thinks Frankfurt’s distinctions on their own cannot explain the fact that some of our basic desires are rationally impotent. As Reitsma puts it:

It wouldn’t really help to appeal to Frankfurt’s idea that some of the father’s desires are “cares” or “loves” ... 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 ... What is needed for the disenfranchisement, the “categori-

cal” 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. (Reitsma 2013, 58)

Reitsma further characterises this objection to Frankfurt as a “new twist” on Watson’s (1975) objection to Frankfurt (2013, 58n21). Watson argues that Frankfurt’s view fails to explain why higher-order desires deserve special standing (specifically, he claims that there is no reason to think that higher-order desires should count as less “wanton” and more an agent’s “own” desires than first-order desires). According to Watson, the fundamental work in Frankfurt’s account is performed not, as Frankfurt suggests, by distinguishing between orders of motivation, but by positing (arguably by fiat) acts of “decisive commitment” or “identification with” a desire.

Reitsma’s response to the puzzle of explaining rationally impotent desires is to introduce a new kind of practical consideration within Frankfurt’s framework. We can describe Reitsma’s proposal in three basic steps: (i) some of the things agents care about are *personal ideals*, (ii) so-called “norms of rational impotence” are constitutive elements of some personal ideals, and (iii) these norms of rational impotence require the agent not to treat certain kinds of basic desires as having normative significance.

How is Reitsma’s solution supposed to improve on Frankfurt’s original account of distinctions between higher-order ruling passions and first-order impulses? Can’t Frankfurt just stipulate that what I will call “urges” – first-order impulses that we don’t identify with in any way – have no normative weight? Reitsma’s thought seems to be that, because Frankfurt’s picture only contains competition between desires of different levels, a father’s violent urge should still “count against” the reason to favour his son’s welfare, even if it is trumped by the weightier consideration of the father’s love. Pointing out that a desire is just an urge is not enough, Reitsma seems to think, to justify giving it zero weight in practical deliberation. So Reitsma seeks to provide an explanation of how the father’s reason to act on this impulse is entirely extinguished by the father’s conflicting concerns. He explains this by appealing firstly to the fact that the agent cares about the personal ideal of being a loving father, and secondly to the claim that the personal ideal of being a loving father *demand*s that impulses to harm one’s offspring are treated as utterly normatively insignificant.

Reitsma offers a sensitive account of the problem of rational impotence for subjectivists, and an intriguing proposed solution that is sympathetic to Frankfurt’s broader framework. But I will argue that Reitsma’s proposal holds an unstable position within Frankfurt’s framework. If Reitsma’s personal ideals can truly achieve the kind of categorical desire “extrusion” that Reitsma intends, then Frankfurt’s account must already contain sufficient resources to explain why urges are rationally impotent. This is because, as I will argue, Reitsma’s account rests on the presumption that cares necessarily outweigh urges *because of* their special place in a person’s motivational structure. But once it is accepted that a desire’s position within a person’s motivational structure can affect its normative weight, there is no reason to deny that there is a certain position within a person’s motivational structure – the position that urges occupy – that carries no normative weight whatsoever.

And this conclusion makes Reitsma's appeal to personal ideals superfluous to explaining the rational impotence of urges.

To see the problem, let us begin by asking the following question: On Reitsma's account, what determines whether one's desire to follow a particular personal ideal, such as the ideal of being a loving father, should be followed? Consider, for example, Reitsma's example of "a person without natural athleticism" who "takes on the daily routine of a striving and ambitious jock and suffers under the weight of his (predictable) failures" (2013, 62). Reitsma implicitly adverts to a prudential principle; something like the idea that one ought to order one's pursuit of one's ends so as to maximise the degree to which one achieves them overall. Reitsma does not state the exact form of the prudential principle he endorses. But as he explains his example, the would-be athlete has a strong practical reason to reject the personal ideal if it "places demands upon him that make it either impossible or exceedingly difficult for him to fulfil other ends that he cares about, or even cares about more," whereas it would be rational to submit to the ideal if the agent cares about it and if "some of his ruling passions favour it, none speak significantly against it" (2013, 62).

As Christine Korsgaard has pointed out, a prudential principle of the kind invoked here cannot be explained by the instrumental principle: the latter is completely silent about the ordering of one's ends overall (1997). In a footnote, Reitsma says that on his own subjectivist view, a principle of prudence only has rational validity for a person insofar as it can be derived from a person's own basic desires, such as a concern for "her own (long-term) welfare" (2013, 51n9). It is unclear to me how such an account could explain the normative force of the prudential principle without already presupposing it, as it raises the question: what gives the relevant basic desire(s) (e.g. the desire to look after one's own long-term welfare) primacy over all of one's other desires (e.g. an addict's desire for heroin, or the would-be athlete's desire to become an athlete)? But let us grant for the sake of argument that this question can be answered; and although it was not specified in the example, let us assume that Reitsma's would-be athlete also possesses whatever basic desires are considered necessary for grounding the application of Reitsma's preferred formulation of the prudential principle.

At this point the following difficulty arises: *If* Reitsma is right that the characterisation of ruling passions as higher-order desires provides no special resources for moving beyond a "trumping" model of competition between desires, then it is unclear how Reitsma's introduction of personal ideals can ever leave that model behind. This is because Reitsma accepts that any particular desire to follow a personal ideal (being a loving father, not being an addict) must be weighed against other desires in order to determine whether it ought to be followed. And although Reitsma, when he writes about the would-be athlete, only considers weighing the desire to follow the personal ideal against other ruling passions, it is unclear why *other* basic desires should not also be considered. If one must weigh one's desire to be an athlete against, for example, one's care that one is successful and respected in one's chosen field, then mustn't one also weigh it against one's impulse to lounge around? And if one must weigh the desire to be an athlete against the impulse to lounge around, then mustn't one similarly weigh the desire not to be an addict against the impulse to take heroin, and the desire to be a loving father against the impulse to murder one's child? My

point is this: according to Reitsma's account, a loving father might rationally "extrude" the impulse to murder the child on the grounds that he desires to live up to the personal ideal of being a loving father, and that the personal ideal demands extrusion of such impulses from practical deliberation. But like Reitsma's would-be athlete, he might now ask himself the question: *shall* I be a loving father? And when *that* question is asked, there appear to be no rational grounds for setting aside the very desires that the personal ideal would require him to extrude, or at least no grounds *other than* the fact that one desire is a personal ideal and the other is a mere impulse. Why can't it sometimes be prudent to give up a personal ideal in the light of a mere first-order desire that the personal ideal treats as a candidate for extrusion, rather than the other way around?

Reitsma faces a dilemma here. On the first horn, he might accept that giving up a personal ideal in the light of one or more first-order desires – even first-order desires that the personal ideal requires us to extrude – could sometimes be prudent. But if this is so, then the loving father's "categorical" rejection of the murderous impulse was not nearly as categorical as Reitsma's account first suggested, since the reason provided by his desire to kill might yet outweigh the reason provided by his desire to maintain his identity as a loving father. To find out whether it does, he needs to weigh one against the other. On the second horn, Reitsma could deny that rejecting a personal ideal in favour of satisfying a first-order desire is ever prudent. But since Reitsma accepts that rejecting a personal ideal in favour of other things you care about *is* sometimes prudent, this must be explained by some fundamental difference in significance between first-order and higher-order motivations; between impulses with which we don't identify and ruling passions with which we do. If Reitsma now accepts that there *is* some fundamental difference in significance between ruling passions and impulses, and that this is sufficient to explain why the reason provided by a ruling passion necessarily outweighs the reason provided by an impulse, then he must also accept the following claim: Something else is relevant to facts about what reasons one has *beyond* facts about what one's basic desires are for, together with the instrumental principle. In particular, whether a basic desire is a ruling passion or an urge will be held to make a normative difference. This difference will presumably be related to the higher-order nature of ruling passions, or to the fact that we identify with them. Whatever its explanation, exactly, the following question arises: If it is a fact about the nature of ruling passions that they provide us with weighty normative reasons, then why can't it be just as much a fact about impulses which we do not, in any respect, identify with, that they have no normative weight at all?¹ And if urges have no normative weight, then the machinery of personal ideals and norms of silencing is no longer needed to explain their rational impotence.

The view that urges have no normative weight will, of course, make different predictions than Reitsma's own rational impotence thesis, since it does not require a norm relating to a personal ideal to extrude each particular impulse deemed rationally impotent. But the differing predictions of the view I suggest here are intuitively plausible. Take Cohon's

¹ I am not primarily interested in Frankfurt interpretation here, but there is strong evidence that this is actually Frankfurt's view. For example, he writes: "the mere fact that a person has a desire does not give him a reason. What it gives him is a problem. He has the problem of whether to identify with the desire and thus validate it as eligible for satisfaction ... If he identifies with the desire, he acknowledges that satisfying it is to be assigned *some* position – however inferior – in the order of his preferences and priorities" (Frankfurt 2006, 11).

example, cited by Reitsma, of “the passing urge to stick my finger into a gooey substance” (2000, 63), where this act which has no objective value; or Quinn’s example of a man who feels an urge to turn on radios for no reason whatsoever (Quinn 1994). It is intuitively plausible that these urges do not provide normative reasons for action, and this intuition seems not to depend on the existence of any personal ideal that specifically excludes such desires from providing reasons. It is perhaps telling that when Reitsma writes “Personally, I’m not convinced everyone would find a desire to stick a finger in goo rationally impotent”, he then gives a *further* ground for performing the act one has a mere urge to perform, “there is, about it, something wonderfully antagonistic to bourgeois standards of cleanliness” (2013, 57). If mere urges were not intuitively rationally impotent in the first place, there should have been no need to advert to any other justification for sticking a finger in the goo. Reitsma mentions the example of “an afternoon’s urge to eat an ice cream cone” as capable of generating, on Frankfurt’s account, the “final ‘ought’ of practical reason.” (2013, 53) Read in one way, it is plausible that it might. But it is difficult to see such a desire as a true “urge” in my sense; that is, as an impulse that we do not identify with in any way. After all, there are many good reasons to endorse acting on a desire to eat ice cream of an afternoon; in particular, ice cream will taste nice and bring us pleasure. If we take more care with our examples, it becomes clearer that mere urges do not give us reasons. An afternoon’s urge to swallow a (harmless) stone does not seem, intuitively, to make it the case that one ought to do it.

Reitsma’s concept of a personal ideal seems to offer a promising subjectivist explanation for why some basic desires are to be treated as rationally impotent. But a difficulty arises when we consider the question of which personal ideals one ought to follow, and why. Either those desires which occupy one place in a person’s motivational structure, the ruling passions, are granted a special normative authority over other desires which occupy a different place, urges, in which case it is unclear why urges should not be said to lack normative authority altogether. This makes the concept of a personal ideal otiose to explaining the rational impotence of urges. Or all desires are on an equal footing, in which case reasons generated by our ruling passions to follow personal ideals need to be weighed against reasons generated by the very impulses that they were supposed to extrude from practical reasoning.

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