

**“YES, THE THEORY IS ABSTEMIOUS, BUT . . .”:  
A CRITIQUE OF YEHEZKEL\***

REGAN LANCE REITSMA

King's College

*ABSTRACT*

*This article is a critique of Gal Yehezkel's attempt to refute subjectivism about normative practical reasons, a school of thought inspired by Hume. Yehezkel believes reason, far from being, as Hume puts it, "the slave of the passions," has the normative authority to be a critic of basic desires and argues that subjectivism lacks the theoretical resources both to acknowledge this alleged truth and to analyze the distinction between wanting an outcome and intending to pursue it. I contend his refutation fails, largely because it operates with a strikingly attenuated view of the subjectivist theory.*

**Keywords:** *Hume, practical reason, normativity, rationalism, subjectivism, realism, constructivism, instrumentalism, basic desires, personal ideals, maieutic ends.*

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, emphasis mine).

Each impulse as it offers itself to the will must pass a kind of test for normativity before we can adopt it as a reason for action (Korsgaard, 1994, 91).

## 1. Introduction

In “A Defense of a Rationalist Conception of Practical Reason,” Gal Yehezkel tells us, “My aim is to show” Hume’s “well-known” claim that reason “is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions” is “false” (40). In Yehezkel’s view, “advocates of the Hume-inspired subjectivist school of thought” are committed to an “instrumental” conception of practical reason that lacks the theoretical resources to account for reason’s “role” within practical deliberation as a “critic of desire” (40, 45, 50-51). Moreover, he believes if we’re to make the ubiquitously relevant—and very obviously real—distinction between merely wanting an outcome and intending to pursue it, we must adopt a notion of the faculty of practical reason “more substantial” than subjectivism can countenance (47).

Yehezkel is certainly going for the gusto. If his arguments were taken to be sound, this would shake the contemporary analytical landscape. Cullity and Gaut helpfully describe contemporary debates about practical reason as a perduring dispute between “three poles”: Humean subjectivism, Kantian constructivism, and (Aristotelian) realism (1997); and within analytic philosophy, subjectivism is often considered the default position in theorizing about practical reasons (Nozick 1993, 133; see, also, Hubin, 1996; Millgram, 2001). Striking (at least for the purposes of this article) the pose of an agnostic between realism and Kantian constructivism, Yehezkel is convinced that, from his several arguments against subjectivism, “the true role of practical reason is revealed, and a rationalist view is established” (40)—“rationalism” is Yehezkel’s name for the view that reason itself has the authority to “determine” whether any particular desire should be given a role in practical deliberation and what an agent ultimately ought to do.<sup>1</sup>

Yehezkel’s argument is bold not only in philosophical import, but in argumentative tactics. His article is replete with the decisive terminology of proof, disproof, and deductive demonstration. His arguments “refute” subjectivism and its instrumental model of practical deliberation, and rationalism is “established” purely by means of conceptual analysis: his purported refutations do not, he tells us, appeal to “any contingent premises” (40, 51). Yehezkel wants to, intends to, take no philosophical prisoners: his opponent’s view “should be replaced” (56).

Myself, I don’t think Yehezkel’s argument—whether taken as a demonstration, as a generic deductive argument, or as, say, an abductive

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<sup>1</sup> Korsgaard gestures at one way to distinguish realist and constructivist conceptions of how, to use Yehezkel’s terminology, rationalist-style reason “determines” how an agent ought to deliberate and behave (1994, 34-37). According to realism, the faculty of practical reason directly *discerns* objective normative truths; according to constructivism, the right answers to the relevant normative questions arise from applying the proper rational tests or procedures. Yehezkel’s word, “determines,” *seems* to be chosen because the word is ambiguous between “reason discerns” and “reason constructs.”

argument—is sound. My basic contention is that Yehezkel’s attempted refutation reflects, among other things, an uncharitable interpretation of the subjectivist school of thought and a crimped interpretation of how subjectivist-style practical reasoning is able to “serve” desire. There are tough questions for Humean subjectivists—I’ll try to identify one at the end of this article—but I don’t think Yehezkel himself has identified a weak point in subjectivist thinking.

## 2. What is Subjectivism?

Subjectivism about practical reason is, among other things, a theory about the ultimate source of normative practical reasons. Let’s understand a normative practical reason, hereafter ‘practical reason,’ to be a consideration in favor of *doing* something.<sup>2</sup> It’s a proper input into practical deliberation, a normative entity that ought to be factored into the process of deciding what to do.<sup>3</sup> Subjectivism claims that an agent’s practical reasons, all of them, ultimately derive from among the “elements” of “his subjective motivational set, S” (Williams, 1993)—or, put more commonsensically, from among his own desires.

This claim—that practical reasons are ultimately grounded in basic, unmotivated conations—has been called, usefully, “the desire-based reasons thesis” (Hubin, 1999; Kagan 1992). 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 juice bar, say. I will often put the subjectivist’s defining idea in this way: 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

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 among her own whims, impulses, desires, wants, cares, loves, intentions, pro-attitudes, and the like—and from nowhere else. Accordingly, subjectivism—in a noteworthy display of its quintessential *philosophical abstemiousness*—rejects any appeal to extra-subjectivist practical reasons or extra-subjectivist constraints upon practical reasons. That is—other than the instrumental principle itself—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 (such as the unnamed, unidentified standards, recognized by rationalist-style reason, implicit in Yehezkel’s critique), as rationally binding upon an agent regardless of what she happens to want.<sup>5</sup>

This is to say that 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. In a characteristically subjectivistic outlook, as Christoph Fehige puts it, “Some things are dear to our hearts. To act rationally . . . means in essence: to look after these things, as best we can” (2001, 49). 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 basic desires 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, the fundamental starting points, of legitimate practical reasoning.

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<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> Note, in a thorough-going subjectivist view (and following Hume, 1888), *even* the principle of prudence gains whatever rational validity it happens to have for a person ultimately from her own basic desires, either 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). The third and final sentence of the quotation from Hume above can be interpreted as reflecting this idea.

### 3. Skepticism about Subjectivism

As mentioned, subjectivism is often considered the default position in theorizing about normative practical reasons. It's generally 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 aren't moved by the perspective from which they are generated (Hubin, 1996).

Put otherwise, when subjectivism levies at an agent the charge “You're behaving irrationally,” the agent's grounds for taking heed are fairly clear. Imagine a very committed student, Desiree, who truly yearns for a good grade on a test, vividly knows she needs to study at length to get one, presently has no competing desires to do something else, and yet simply finds in herself no desire to crack open her book or to survey her class notes. She has a very weighty, even final practical reason to study, but there she sits, stultified. Desiree is guilty, it's natural to say, of “means-end irrationality.” And since subjectivism treats practical reasoning as, at its very core, a “desire-governed” activity, this theory will be able to explain in a very intuitive way—to “any Desiree” it encounters—why it should matter *to her* that she has violated its standards. In violating subjectivism's standards, an agent is failing to “look after” her own desired ends.

All this said, subjectivism is a controversial theory. Obviously, it has its share of historically venerable opponents (many of whom I deeply admire). Hume's construction, “Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions” is a backwards-looking provocation. It's intended to subvert—rather boisterously—the long-standing idea, advanced by philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas, that reason should rule. Disciples of such philosophers can and have wondered how these philosophers would best respond to Hume. Subjectivism's contemporary critics, whether on behalf of old philosophical visions or new, have raised many objections. Let's consider three.

First, several contemporary critics suppose subjectivism's theory-defining commitment to the rational potency of basic desires is subject to striking counterexamples: there are, this objection asserts, identifiable basic conations that simply don't generate practical reasons—people do, after all, find themselves wanting some very bizarre and some very awful things. Rachel Cohon, a realist, imagines a basic, unmotivated desire to stick one's finger in goo, finds it appropriate to judge this conation rationally impotent, and analyzes the case in this way: if the object of a basic conation lacks positive objective value, it is unable to generate practical reasons (2000, 63). Susan Wolf (2002)—who takes herself to be a more permissive, normatively-easier-going realist—judges that a desire

whose object lacks positive objective value but isn't objectively disvaluable (such as, perhaps, the desire to stick one's finger in goo) might generate practical reasons, but a desire whose object is objectively disvaluable (such as a vengeful impulse) does not.<sup>6</sup>

Second, another realist, Thomas Nagel, finds any Hume-inspired theory "glaringly incorrect" (2012, 106). After four decades of (impressive) philosophical investigation, there are, it is his much-scrutinized verdict, identifiable objective value judgments—such as 'it's wrong to torture animals'—that *must* be correct. He believes his intuitions about objective value, some of them intuitions about objective moral value, are sufficiently philosophically weighty to justify (i) rejecting subjectivism, (ii) developing a metaphysic that makes sense of these intuitions about objective value, and (iii) believing such objective values should carry strong weight within practical deliberation independently of any desires we happen (not) to have.

Third, some of subjectivism's contemporary critics (such as Christine Korsgaard) have objected—in very broad terms, and sometimes rather incredulously—that subjectivism is, in one or another way, an overly simple, even crude theory; to paraphrase the spirit of this complaint: "How can a theory with such a stripped down notion of the faculty of practical reason accurately represent the rich and complex processes of practical reasoning?"

Yehezkel's arguments are very much an expression of the third—very broad, incredulous—objection. Whereas Cohon and Wolf appeal to bizarre basic conations, Yehezkel believes that subjectivism fails to analyze any desires correctly—even very ordinary desires about going to a party and about becoming a hairdresser. As for a Nagel-style argument, Yehezkel very explicitly asserts he will not appeal to any substantive value judgments whatsoever (41, 54, 56). Instead, Yehezkel's aim is to show up the poverty of any instrumental conception of practical reason, and to do so purely through conceptual analysis, by reflecting on the ubiquitously relevant concepts of desiring, wanting an outcome, and intending to pursue an end.

So, how, we might ask, does Yehezkel *frame* his purported refutation?

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<sup>6</sup> If you were to discover within your psychology an impulse to stick your finger in goo, a preliminary question would be whether this conation is basic or motivated. In an eleven year old boy of a certain disposition, it's likely to be a desire motivated by a more basic desire to gross out his friends—in which case the question whether his icky desire is a rationally impotent basic conation doesn't apply. That said, if such a conation did well up in me in the form of a basic conation, I'd be inclined to regard it—whatever its etiology—somewhat positively, say, as a small token of protest against today's prim standards of bourgeois cleanliness. (Perhaps there is in this seemingly small thought an important implication for subjectivism: namely, can't a person invest basic conations with new meaning—and with a role within her will—by "attaching" them to already held cares, concerns, and commitments?)

The following remarks are, I believe, helpful for thinking about Yehezkel’s basic approach.

In the second (lengthy) quotation at the very beginning of this article, Korsgaard, a Kantian constructivist and “rationalist” in Yehezkel’s sense, imagines what we might call the “ur moment of agency,” the moment when a self-conscious being finds in herself a desire. As Korsgaard construes this moment, the agent asks herself, “Is this desire *really* a reason to act?” (1994, 93, emphasis mine).

Just to be clear, a subjectivist need not regard a basic desire “as” a practical reason: a basic desire is a mental state, a practical reason is a normative entity. Accordingly, I’ve described subjectivism as a theory that treats basic desires such as thirst and sleepiness as “sources” of practical reasons. That said, any subjectivist should take the slightly altered question, asked by an agent in the ur moment, “Should I treat this basic desire as rationally potent, that is, as the source of a practical reason for me?” to be a perfectly legitimate query. The simple truth is that a subjectivist will answer this question, at least in standard cases, ‘yes’. (Does “in standard cases” sound weasely? Be patient; I’ll address that objection, at length, in Section IV.)

Korsgaard makes it very clear she does *not* mean for this “Can I treat this desire as reason-giving?” question to be philosophically innocent. On the contrary, she’s making a fundamental, reject-it-at-the-roots dismissal of the core subjectivist idea, namely, that practical reasoning “bottoms out” in appeals to basic, unmotivated desires. As she would have it, a basic desire, when initially recognized by an agent, presents not (as Hume himself would have it) a starting point for instrumental thinking, but a “problem.” Korsgaard believes that any and every basic conation “must pass a kind of test of normativity before we can adopt it as a reason for acting” (1994, 91).

Similar to Korsgaard, Yehezkel’s construal of the process of practical deliberation begins with the ur moment. Though he nicknames basic, unmotivated conations “suggestions” (42, 53, 54, 56), which is more friendly than Korsgaard’s “problems,” his basic framework is anti-subjectivist. A basic, unmotivated conation does not, by itself, generate any practical reasons whatsoever. Instead, every such conation must stand before the tribunal of practical reason and can be—in some cases, ought to be—“dismissed” (45) or “discarded” (50) by reason itself, which is presumably a form of categorical rejection that implies the relevant desire does not deserve to play any positive role in practical deliberation. As Yehezkel puts it, “reason can be used by an agent to evaluate, that is, to approve or reject, final ends, which might be suggested by desires” (40, 56).

A time or two, Yehezkel intimates that the philosophical cost of rejecting rationalism (and accepting the subjectivist’s idea that all legitimate

practical reasoning is “governed by desire”) is especially, even shockingly high. Take a “pure wanton”—my phrase, not Yehezkel’s—to be a creature that, though it has the capacity for self-reflection, is “simply pushed and pulled by desires” (46) in a way analogous to a person “being pulled by two ropes in two different directions” (48). This creature never exercises, we’re to suppose, any latent capacity to participate in practical deliberation and so persists as nothing more than an arena in which competing desires battle to be satisfied. Yehezkel seems to argue that if we are to believe that people are not pure wantons but are capable of forming intentions and so intending to act, we *must* adopt rationalism and its “more substantial” conception of reason (46). In his view, if rationalist-style reason does not “intervene” within practical deliberation—to turn desire’s “suggestions” into rationally endorsed wanted outcomes, and rationally endorsed wanted outcomes into “pursuits”—then absolutely nothing can. Adopting subjectivism is, this is to say, tantamount to denying human agency.

#### 4. Subjectivism and the Tribunal of Practical Reason

Note, Yehezkel’s arguments presume that subjectivists are compelled by their theory to regard the faculty of practical reason as mute within the ur moment. When an agent finds in herself a basic desire, at “stage one,” mum’s the word from practical reason; it simply treats the basic desire as reason-giving and heads to “stage two” to do its proper task, seeking out means to its satisfaction. As I’ll argue, this presumption, taken as a construal of modern-day subjectivism about practical reason, is mistaken. The core elements of subjectivism do not imply that the relevant “tribunal seat” is empty. Though a subjectivist will construe practical reason as incapable of a form of “intrinsic rational criticism” that realists and constructivists endorse, he can countenance various forms of “desire-governed” rational scrutiny of, and rational criticism of, basic conations. Let me explain.

No doubt, 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 way (Russell, 1954). (This is the view, following other theorists, Yehezkel calls “pure instrumentalism” [40].) It will be relevant to recognize that the subjectivist school of thought as a whole is neither committed to pure instrumentalism, nor to a highly straightforward or simplistic model of practical reasoning.

Here is what I mean. Subjectivism certainly treats the process of instrumental reasoning—identifying basic desires; seeking effective means—as the *paradigm* activity of practical reasoning. For that matter, subjectivism also treats the process of weighing (sets of) competing



practical reasons against each other as a crucial step in determining the “final ‘ought’ before action.” (More on that later.) When subjectivists provide illustrations of practical reasoning, they generally appeal to what we might call “garden-variety” examples of instrumental reasoning that seek out causal, criteriological, or mereological means to already-desired ends: being thirsty and seeking out behavior that will cause the thirst to go away, or wanting to run an officially-sponsored marathon and seeking out a race that meets the relevant criteria, or hoping to complete a particular twelve-step program and seeking out what the third step in the program actually is (Hubin, 1999).

There are, though, strains of subjectivism that posit forms of practical reasoning that are desire-based but don’t fit the profile suggested by garden-variety examples. For instance, David Schmidtz (2001) argues that some legitimate practical reasoning is “maieutic”: a matter not of finding right means to already-desired ends, but of seeking out and choosing new ends to desire. 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), maieutic reasoning is agent-relative and desire-governed, and Schmidtz’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.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, I myself have proposed a structural complexity that is, against the historical grain, available to subjectivism: a form of “categorical” reasoning, the disenfranchising—or “dismissing” or “discarding” or “silencing”—of basic desires that violate a cared-about personal ideal (Reitsma, 2013). As I see things, in the run of life we often do treat our basic, unmotivated desires as reason-giving: you feel thirsty and you take yourself to have a reason to drink; you get sleepy and take yourself to have a reason to sleep. Occasionally, though, we find in ourselves an impulse or desire that gives us pause, or even horrifies us. In such a case, a person might proclaim, “I can’t treat *that impulse* as reason-giving,” or—with an interestingly different inflection—“I can’t treat that impulse as reason-giving.” One question is whether a subjectivist can, in good standing with the core elements of her theory, interpret *some* such cases as instances in which a basic desire is rendered rationally impotent. I’ve

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<sup>7</sup> Yehezkel says, “By an ‘end’ I simply mean a final end, that is, something we pursue for its own sake—rather than . . . a maieutic end” (43). But this confuses the shape of a maieutic end with its adoption. A maieutic end is adopted so as to satisfy another desired end; but once adopted, its object is itself desired, and so pursued, for its own sake.

argued that she can.

Here's one way how. My proposal appeals to the idea that at least some people care about what we might sensibly call "personal ideals." 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 present and long-term welfare. Let's imagine that a particular loving mother not only cares about her children, but also strongly desires to *be* a good parent. This mother's ruling passion and her partially corresponding personal ideal make demands upon her. Behavioral demands: she ought to feed and clothe her child. Emotional demands: she ought to experience characteristic patterns of emotional concern for her children. 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, in the run of a particular devotee's life, 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's "neediness," 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 voices of her love and her desire to be a good parent deserve 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.

Here is the crux of the matter, at least with respect to my proposal. Among its various volitional demands, a personal ideal might place restrictions on what a devotee can treat as reason-giving. Borrowing an example from Gary Watson (1982), imagine that a devoted mother finds in herself, rather out of the blue, an utterly uncharacteristic desire to drown her beloved infant. A good parent will not treat, this mother sensibly supposes, a violent impulse against her child as generating a reason. This impulse is not merely 'trumped', or even 'swamped', by the weightier "love-based" practical reasons she has. This impulse is, for the parent, rationally impotent and so deserves to be silenced."<sup>8</sup> The mother's personal ideal includes, we might say, "norms of rational impotence" that

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<sup>8</sup> Note, this tweaks the meaning of the Aristotelian John McDowell's word 'silenced' (1979). For McDowell, a "silenced" consideration doesn't even arise in the virtuous agent's practical deliberation. In this mother's intended usage, to say a desire is "silenced" is to say it is treated as categorically unworthy of consideration.

demand this response. Since in my proposal 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-governed but non-garden-variety form of practical reasoning and so coheres, deeply, with the core elements of subjectivism.<sup>9</sup>

These two forms of practical reasoning are more complex in structure than a subjectivist model (such as pure instrumentalism) that includes only varieties of instrumental reasoning akin to the “garden-variety” cases. In both models, reason—desire-governed reason—plays a “more substantial” role in practical deliberation than seeking causal, criteriological, or mereological means. In the model presented by Schmitz, desire-governed reason is playing a “role” in advising the agent to adopt, and so—if reason’s practical advice is successfully heeded—in generating, a newly desired end. In my own proposal, desire-governed reason is involved in appraising—and sometimes in “discarding” or “dismissing”—a basic conation. In both of these cases, though, the “shape” of reason is not “rationalist.”

Perhaps, to stave off my reader’s incredulity, it’s important to point out that the desire-based reasons thesis, though it does state that *all* practical reasons are grounded in basic desires, does not imply, in and of itself, that *every* basic desire generates practical reasons. If we ask the question, “Is it possible for a subjectivist to grant that there are rationally impotent basic conations?” the desire-based reasons thesis does not logically rule out a yes answer. My proposal not only recognizes this logical possibility, it presents a positive case for the claim that some basic desires are rendered, by desire-governed reason, rationally impotent.

There are at least two other ways “desire-governed reason” might occupy the seat of a tribunal that rationally scrutinizes basic conations. First, it is possible for an agent to come to have an instrumental reason to (strive to) eradicate a “mere want.” That is, desire-governed reasoning can sensibly lead an agent to consider whether merely having a particular desire is detrimental to the successful pursuit of other strongly desired ends. A father desperately fighting an addiction, partly so that he can live up to his desire to be a good father, will likely recognize he has an extremely strong instrumental reason, if he can discover the means, to eradicate his addictive impulses. Second, some basic desires are *unsatisfiable*, and so, given that there are no means to their satisfaction, do not generate any practical reasons. In some such cases, it is a contingent fact that there are no means to the relevant desire’s satisfaction: a person craves the last donut in the box, but his hands are chock full of books such that it’s painfully obvious he can’t pick up the donut before someone else snags it. Also, conceivably a person could find himself wanting a logically impossible end, akin to desiring to have your cake and eat it, too’ or

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<sup>9</sup> For a critical discussion of my proposal, see Rippon (2014).

desiring that ‘ $2 + 7 = 11$ ’. A subjectivist can, consistent with her theory, regard unsatisfiable desires as unable to generate practical reasons.

To summarize and to suggest some useful terminology, a subjectivist might argue for the “default” rational potency of basic conations. Let’s describe things in this way: whereas Korsgaard favors treating a basic conation as in and of itself “rationally impotent” and needing to “earn,” through rationalist-style reason’s endorsement, the “normative right” to play a positive role in practical deliberation, the subjectivist is committed, in the very least, to the idea that a basic conation is “rationally potent unless rendered otherwise.” In other words, subjectivists will generally presume that a basic conation is rationally potent, but they are able to employ models such as Schmidtz’s or mine or the two mentioned in the previous paragraph to handle non-standard cases. The general point is that there are ways for a subjectivist to account for “reason’s role” in generating newly desired ends and “reason’s role” in rationally scrutinizing basic desires. We’ll have to see whether these theoretical resources are sufficient to address Yehezkel’s purported refutation, his consistent refrain that, unless we appeal to “rationalism,” it will be impossible to analyze cases of intending to act, or wanting something without intending to pursue it.

## 5. Yehezkel’s Main Argument

So, what is the structure of Yehezkel’s purported refutation?

The author distinguishes between desiring, wanting, intending, and acting intentionally (42-47). The distinction most clearly central to the author’s argument is between wanting [an outcome] and intending [to bring about that outcome] (46-47). This distinction, as I said earlier, is very obviously real. Following one of Yehezkel’s examples, Penny might want to eat ice cream, but have no intention to devour any, perhaps because she has firmly resolved to save money. Also, Naomi might want to attend Susan’s party, but—since she realizes the party is almost finished and she’s miles and miles away—not form any intention whatsoever to travel in its direction.

The crucial question, Yehezkel believes, is “How best to analyze such examples?” In Yehezkel’s view, the best—the correct—model of practical reasoning is rationalism: a rationalist form of reason, he thinks, plays a role in every decision whether to treat a basic conation as reason-generating and every decision about whether to intend to do what is wanted. But Yehezkel can’t simply *assert* that his anti-subjectivist theory of practical deliberation is correct; that would beg the question. This prompts him to search for a “proof” that subjectivism is incapable of analyzing examples—in his view, any examples—of wanting an outcome without intending to pursue it.

Yehezkel doesn't think this—the discovery of a proof—has been accomplished within the philosophical literature. Here's his diagnosis:

previous attempts to refute the instrumental conception of practical reason have . . . relied upon situations in which an agent has more than one end, in order to support the claim that reason is used in a more substantial role than that of simply determining the means to an end . . . Supporters of the instrumental conception of practical reason can, however, attempt to explain the distinction between want and intention by the possibility of an agent's having more than one desire, and hence more than one end . . . one end, determined by desires, is put aside for the sake of another end, also determined by desires. This situation *prima facie* explains how it is possible for an agent to have a want . . . for an end, while at the same time having no intention to pursue this end (47-48).

In other words, the subjectivist can always say, about any situation in which a person has competing desires, “Well, Penny wants to eat ice cream but doesn't intend to eat any because there is something else, inconsistent with eating ice cream, that she wants even more.” That is, the subjectivist will treat Penny's “firm resolution” to save money as grounded in a desire that is presently in competition for her hankering for something sweet.

In response, Yehezkel makes this judgment: if there is, in a particular case, an explanation of how the agent has a want to X without a corresponding intention to X, an explanation that is consistent with ‘instrumentalism’, then ‘instrumentalism’ (though false) isn't yet refuted. Accordingly, Yehezkel believes anti-subjectivists should construct an utterly new type of example: a case of an agent with only one desire. This type of case is best able to *reveal*—to conclusively prove—that we must appeal to rationalist-style reason to countenance intending to act (50-55). This appeal to a new type of example is what makes his argument “novel” (40, 49-50).

Structurally, Yehezkel argues in what we might call a “reason of the gaps” strategy: if, to analyze a particular case of wanting but not intending to act (especially of a single-desire agent wanting but not intending to act), we appeal to no more than the concepts (basic desires, means-end reasoning) that any and every subjectivist conception of practical reason permits, then we are left at an impasse and we thereby discover that “reason can intervene” (47) or “reason must enable” (46) or we “can only turn to reason” (45) to equip us to analyze the act.

Here is Yehezkel's allegedly debate-clinching example:

Suppose that [single-desire] Naomi is too far from Sara's house to get to the party before it ends. Realizing that this is the case, Naomi gives up on going to the party. Obviously, she still wants to

go, but she has no intention to go, because she knows that it is impossible for her to get there. Hence, participating in this event can no longer be described as her end (50).

The striking conclusion:

This example shows us that [desired] ends are susceptible to rational criticism. An agent's ability to override the force of a specific desire by the use of reason does not depend on the force of another conflicting desire, but on the authority of reason. It is simply unreasonable to intend to realize an impossible end, and hence the use of reason enables an agent to reject a final end that is suggested by desire (50).

What to make of this argument?

## 6. A Subjectivist's Response

The target of this attempted refutation, the subjectivist, won't be very impressed, whether he is inclined to accept a simpler or a more complex strain of the Humean school of thought. I suppose some subjectivists might harbor a suspicion that the example of Naomi presumes other basic desires: if Naomi is a rather ordinary person, she presumably doesn't want to expend physical energy, or significant gas money, on a foolhardy, wild goose chase. But Yehezkel would likely accuse such a move of begging the question: he has stipulated, after all, that the desire to go to the party is Naomi's only desire.

It's not clear whether Yehezkel is asking us to conceive of Naomi as a quite unusual creature, a philosopher's fancy, who literally has one and only one basic desire for all or most of her life. (If someone dropped an anvil on Naomi's foot, would her desire to go to Sara's party remain her sole conation, her only fixation?) Or, alternatively, whether Yehezkel would like us to see Naomi as a "more ordinary" person who, caught in a brief episode of one-track-mindedness, has one and only one desire present in her soul at the moment. I'm not sure it matters, though. As I see it, however we interpret Naomi's psyche, there are other, more serious problems for Yehezkel's argument.

First, as discussed earlier, a subjectivist simply needn't deny that *unsatisfiable* basic desires fail to generate practical reasons. In the subjectivist's view, a practical reason is generated by a basic desire, plus facts relevant to its satisfaction. In cases in which there is, even by simple happenstance, no means to the desire's satisfaction (i.e. its object obtaining), there is no practical reason. This is to say that a Humean subjectivist would, same as Yehezkel, regard Naomi as lacking any practical reason to attempt to travel to the party. The proximate dialectical upshot: subjectivism has the theoretical resources to analyze

this purported counterexample.

Second, stepping back into the broader dialect, Yehezkel’s would-be clincher simply doesn’t strike me as the sort of example that might knock a tottering subjectivist (such as myself, by the way) into the arms of anti-subjectivism. Merely wanting to go to a party isn’t the kind of desire realists or Kant, taken as a constructivist, typically find “glaringly” contrary to reason.

Myself, I have ears to hear the call of a Nagel-style argument against subjectivism’s implicit rejection of the objectivity of value. Nagel believes some intuitions about the objectivity of moral value should be treated as having profound metaphysical import. Though I’m not inclined to adopt Nagel’s particular metaphysic, when I see, for example, a vulnerable human being treated with contempt, I feel the force of Nagel’s desire to build a metaphysic that makes “deep sense” of the idea that such contempt is blind to the reality of person’s true value.

Also, given the odd quirks of human psychology, and the shocking, knavish, and cruel loves of seemingly morally pernicious people (imaginary or real), I can feel the strong pull of Cohon- and Wolf-style arguments that appeal to realist norms. Truly suicidal thoughts experienced by an otherwise well-off person, petty and vengeful desires, brute contempt for the weak, hatred or disdain for sentient animals, these are basic conations that might intuitively be charged with being intrinsically demerited. Does Naomi’s desire deserve anything like the same sort of criticism?

I don’t think so. To my thinking, Naomi’s desire *itself* does not warrant the type of categorical rational criticism—“dismissing” or “discarding”—Yehezkel seems to levy at it. We can see, I submit, why someone who cares about behaving, and so deliberating, like a good parent would find a basic desire to harm her child as itself objectionable. But if, on Yehezkel’s conception, rationalist-style reason judges Naomi’s happy-go-lucky desire intrinsically irrational, reason might come to seem—not so much a helpmate for the agent’s heart or for his deepest moral convictions, but—a dour and seriously unfun faculty.

I’ll press a little harder. Doesn’t a subjectivist analysis of this case have, at least at a glance, notable *advantages* over Yehezkel’s? Subjectivism takes our natural tendency to treat our basic desires as reason-giving and endorses the general run of this rampantly ubiquitous practice—as I’ve been saying, subjectivism has an “easy way about it” that complex strains of subjectivism attempt to nuance. Wouldn’t a sensible theory of practical reason likewise grant Naomi’s desire to go to the party, even if it turns out, by happenstance, to be impossible to satisfy, *some* measure of normative weight? In the present circumstances, this basic desire doesn’t generate a practical reason for Naomi to, say, get in a car. But the desire

would seem to justify other attitudes she might have. What if circumstances changed? If by chance Sara decided to change her party to a more favorable date, Naomi's desire to attend, once there is a means to its satisfaction, would presumably generate a practical reason. Accordingly, what if Naomi began to *hope* Sara will choose to change the party's date to another day? Wouldn't Naomi's wanting to go to the party play a role in rationally justifying this hope? Moreover, think of Naomi's feelings. Let's say Naomi, realizing she can't make it to Sara's party, indulged in a few moments of "aw, darn" consternation that she has to miss the party; it would help to rationally justify her emotional response if we were to see the desire as characteristically capable of generating practical reasons. The subjectivist can say Naomi's mild displeasure is warranted, since she's missing out on something that (to one degree or another) matters to her. The point: this rather innocuous desire doesn't seem to be the kind of desire that ought to come in for robust rational criticism. Unlike the mother's out-of-the-blue violent impulse, which is condemned by the mother's cared-about personal ideal, Naomi's doesn't warrant being "targeted" by reason.

## 7. Summing Up

I've argued that, though a subjectivist is committed to denying that a satisfiable basic conation can be *intrinsically* rationally impotent, she is able to conceptualize the faculty of practical reason such that it plays the role of a "critic" of basic conations. The theory is abstemious, but not nearly as limited as Yehezkel supposes. I find it important to say, too, that Yehezkel's claim that a subjectivist theory cannot make sense of the notion of an intentional action seems extravagant to me: is, for instance, the Bratman-style (1999) idea that intentions are partial plans unavailable to a subjectivist?

My critique could, in some reader's minds, raise the question whether I have simply, flat-out misunderstood the structure of Yehezkel's argument. I've wondered this myself. (If I have misconstrued his arguments, may Yehezkel live up to his name and find it in him to forgive me.)

However, Yehezkel's arguments seem to me, in crucial ways, underdeveloped and vague. To argue that a school of thought lacks the theoretical resources to analyze important concepts or important examples would *seem* to require the critic to display this school of thought at its very best and subsequently point out that the theory, even in tip-top form, is unable to account for the relevant ideas. Yehezkel, however, appears to direct his objections at the most minimal form of subjectivism—pure instrumentalism—not at its most sophisticated. Yehezkel himself says that pure instrumentalism "is the starting point of my analysis" (40), and at no point does he critically engage a less



minimalist subjectivist account and its theoretical resources.<sup>10</sup> Also, instead of providing definitions, or in the very least helpful glosses, of instrumentalism, subjectivism and rationalism, he tends to employ stock phrases.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, my interpretation of the structure and content of Yehezkel’s reasoning gains credibility if we consider the other bold argument he makes. Recall, Yehezkel argues that if rationalist-style reason doesn’t “intervene” to endorse or reject a particular basic desire, there’s simply nothing else that can, and the relevant person will be at the mercy of whichever conation happens to be the causally most powerful. In such an event, this person is not, Yehezkel intimates, truly an agent at all, but a “pure wanton,” a creature merely “pushed and pulled” by desires (46; see also, 48). But doesn’t this argument simply conflate subjectivism and behaviorism? If Yehezkel’s conception of subjectivist-style reason is one according to which “reason” does nothing more than stand by as desires simply overpower the creature, it is an attenuated conception of subjectivism, indeed!

Otherwise put, when a Humean subjectivist regards reason as “the slave to the passions,” she needn’t suppose the faculty of practical reason is, as it were, gagged and straightjacketed, unable to participate in the causal processes between discerning desires and behavior. Instead, the sense in which practical reason is, in the subjectivist view, “the slave,” is that the faculty of practical reason takes its “bidding,” its substantive orders and practical advice, from what the agent, as Fehige put it, “finds dear” (2001, 49). And, as I’ve tried to add, some desired ends are sufficiently complex that they make demands on how an agent ought to treat the conations that happen to well up in her day-to-day psychology.

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<sup>10</sup> Yehezkel does mention subjectivists who reject pure instrumentalism (40), but he doesn’t, within what I’ve called his “main argument,” attempt to reveal that such subjectivists—theorists who seemingly have developed more theoretical resources than the pure instrumentalist—can’t analyze the cases he constructs.

<sup>11</sup> I see a penchant within Yehezkel’s article to use the word ‘reason’ in a way that’s unhelpfully vague. In my view, Yehezkel should very clearly distinguish between rationalist-style reasoning and desire-governed reasoning and construct examples in which it “must” be rationalist-style reason, *not* a form of desire-governed reason, that is doing the relevant work within the agent’s practical deliberation. In several cases, however, the “use of reason” Yehezkel identifies is, in the very least arguably, an instance of garden-variety instrumental reasoning. In such cases, I’m inclined to agree—“yes, reason is doing the work”—but, contrary to the thrust of Yehezkel’s argument, it’s nothing more than instrumental reason.

## 8. Where To From Here?

Despite my criticisms of Yehezkel's arguments, there are, of course, tough questions for subjectivists. There always are for theories that cut to the philosophical bone. Let me attempt to broach one particular hard question, perhaps suggested by Yehezkel's arguments, for "complex" strains of subjectivism that appeal to the existence of such philosophical constructs as "cared-about ideals" and "ruling passions."

Subjectivists very often distinguish between an agent's cares and her "mere wants." I myself have consistently done this in the stock subjectivist examples I've provided. For instance, I've treated the mother's love for her child as a "ruling passion" and her desire to be a good parent as a "ruling passion" that is also a "cared-about ideal." Whatever else a "ruling passion" is, it's supposed to be a conation that, in the complex subjectivist's thinking, deserves special authority within the relevant agent's practical reasoning: for instance, in normal circumstances, when a ruling passion is in conflict with a "mere desire," the ruling passion generates weightier practical reasons that ought, ultimately, to be acted upon.

"How," a critic (or, for that matter, a thoughtful, self-reflective subjectivist) might ask, "do some basic conations gain, for a particular agent, more normative authority than others?" Calling a basic desire a "ruling passion" obviously isn't enough. The phrases 'mere desire' and 'ruling passion' mark the distinction, but they don't answer the question.

Some conceivable answers certainly won't do. Is it merely that the parental desire is more intense, in a phenomenological sense, than the violent whim? That doesn't seem right: if the whim increases in intensity, does it threaten to become a ruling passion? The sorts of subjectivists I'm thinking about—"complex subjectivists" who think practical reasoning is about "looking after" what one finds "dear"—certainly won't think so. Is it merely that the parental desire has greater causal power? But then we don't seem to be talking so much about which desire *deserves* greater normative authority; we're simply heading in a behaviorist direction, according to which the "right" action is whatever behavior happens to occur.

"So," the question for the "complex subjectivist" is, "what *is* your account?"

Let's make a distinction between two examples of the ur moment: an "in-the-midst-of-life" ur moment and an "earlier" such moment.

Within the philosophical literature, there are much-developed accounts of how ruling passions differ from mere desires, and why—in the midst of an ordinary, mature person's life—her already developed "loves" and "cares" deserve special normative authority. Harry Frankfurt (1988, 1999,

2004, 2006), for instance, can be seen as having spent the better part of a distinguished career developing this type of account. The loving mother who feels a violent impulse to harm her child, it is worth noting, confronts this particular “ur moment” with an already well-developed practical point of view. She knows what she finds dear. And perhaps the complex subjectivist is able to account for why her particular cares and concerns should carry so much weight for her. When the mother follows the dictates of her ruling passions, we can see her behavior as rational in the very sense stultified Desiree’s isn’t.

But consider a developmental version of the above question. You and I haven’t always had a well-developed conception of what we care about. Once, at whatever age we were, we confronted desires without yet having a strong sense of what kind of person we desired to be. Noting this might lead to the question: “How, dear subjectivist, from the ‘raw material’ of the conations a developing person—a budding agent—happens to find within herself, plus practical thinking, do ruling passions arise? When an agent without ruling passions confronts his basic conations, how does he properly decide what to do or what, more significantly, he cares about?”<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, a version of the earlier anti-subjectivist suspicion might naturally arise: “Reason, a more robust type of reason than subjectivism countenances, must play some role in identifying, within a growing person’s thinking, which basic conations *deserve* to be granted a high level of practical sway within the agent’s life.” Did the loving mother, after all, simply “opt” in some “brute way” to prefer her affectionate impulses to whatever other desires she happened to find in herself?

I suspect many skeptics of subjectivism will suppose the development of a heart, the development of a personal or practical point of view, a perspective from which some things come to be “dear” to a person, requires a type of practical guidance that a Humean will be hard-pressed to countenance.

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<sup>12</sup> For a similar challenge to Frankfurt's "complex" subjectivist theory of practical reason, see Reitsma (2013, 62-64).

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