



**DISCUSSION NOTE**

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A CRITICAL NOTE ON SCHROEDER'S HYPOTHETICALISM*

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## A New Theory of Humean Reasons? A Critical Note on Schroeder's Hypotheticalism \*

**M**ARK SCHROEDER HAS ARTICULATED a novel Humean theory of reasons, which he calls *Hypotheticalism*.<sup>1</sup> On this view, roughly, a reason for X to do A is a true proposition that helps explain why X's doing A will promote the object of one of X's desires. This is supposed to mark an improvement over traditional Humean views, which, according to Schroeder, hold that desires as such are reasons, or parts of reasons. Here I spell out Hypotheticalism in more detail, and argue that it fails to meet a condition of adequacy for any Humean theory. Specifically, for a representative agent X who has a non-derivative desire that p, Hypotheticalism does not identify plausible reasons for X to perform those actions that simply make it the case that p.

### Hypotheticalism on Reasons

The following example from Schroeder (see 2007, 1-2) draws out the essentials of Hypotheticalism and its take on reasons. Ronnie likes to dance, and Bradley does not. There is a party to which everyone is invited. Pre-theoretically, Ronnie has a reason to go to the party that Bradley does not have, and this difference in their reasons is explained by a difference in their psychology.

Under a traditional Humean theory, you might think that the fact that Ronnie desires to dance *is* a reason for Ronnie to dance, or is a reason for Ronnie to take the means to dancing, or something in this ballpark. Under Hypotheticalism, however, desires as such are not reasons or parts of reasons. Instead, we have:

**Reason** For R to be a reason for X to do A is for there to be some p such that X has a desire whose object is p, and the truth of R is part of what explains why X's doing A promotes p (59).

Here, A promotes p just in case A makes p more likely, as compared to doing nothing (113).<sup>2</sup> And, for Schroeder, "explanation" and its cognates are used

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<sup>1</sup> Schroeder, M. 2007, *Slaves of the Passions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Thus I take it that Hypotheticalism does not provide a novel answer to the question "What do agents have reason to do?" Indeed, under the plausible assumption that "makes the object of one's desires likely true (relative to doing nothing)" comes to the same thing as "serves the satisfaction of one's desires," it seems to fit Bernard Williams' classic characteri-

in a metaphysical sense, not an epistemic sense; explanations are facts about “what is true because of what” (29, note 12). I will not take issue with any of these details.

In Ronnie’s case, that *there will be dancing at the party*<sup>3</sup> is a reason (R) for Ronnie (X) to go to the party (A) because it (R) is part of what explains why Ronnie’s going to the party (A) makes it more probable that he dances (p). That *there will be dancing at the party* does *not* partly explain why Bradley’s going to the party will promote the object of one of his desires, so this is not a reason for Bradley to go.

### Actions That Directly Satisfy One’s Desires

Not only does Ronnie have reason to go to the party, but he also has reason to put on his dancing shoes, leave his house, enter the house of the party, find the dance floor, position himself for dancing, etc., all because, for each of these actions, there is some true proposition that is part of what explains why doing that action will make it more likely that he dances.

But in addition to identifying plausible reasons to take all the (insufficient) means to dancing, an adequate Humean theory of the kind Schroeder offers must also identify plausible reasons for Ronnie to dance. It would be unintelligible for a Humean theory to leave Ronnie stranded on the dance floor with no reason to dance, having complied with all his other reasons up to this point. The problem with Hypotheticalism is that it does not identify any plausible reason for Ronnie to dance. Or so I now argue.

Under Hypotheticalism, the question becomes whether there is a true proposition that partly explains why Ronnie’s dancing promotes the object of *some* desire of his. There are two ways this can happen: either dancing promotes the object of his desire to dance, or dancing promotes the object of some other desire of his.

Consider the second option first. Ronnie might have some desire other than his desire to dance whose object is promoted by his dancing. For instance, Ronnie might have a second-order desire that he do what satisfies his first-order desires (see 31). In that case, that *Ronnie desires to dance* would be

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zation of a *sub-Humean* theory: “[X] has reason to [do A] iff [X] has some desire the satisfaction of which will be served by his [doing A],” Williams, B. 1981, “Internal and External Reasons” in *Moral Luck* (pp. 101-113), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 101 (here I substitute the variables Schroeder uses into Williams’ formulation).

<sup>3</sup> I will italicize propositions that are candidate reasons.

part of what explains why his dancing promotes the object of his second-order desire, and he would have at least that reason to dance.

However, we cannot depend on the presence of some desire other than his desire to dance to do this work. Hypotheticalism in no way guarantees that Ronnie will have a second-order desire, or any other relevant desire, that generates some reason to dance. (Just imagine that dancing is pretty much the only thing Ronnie cares about). Because no adequate theory of Humean reasons can leave open the possibility that Ronnie, having complied with all his other reasons and finding himself on the dance floor, has no reason to dance, it must look elsewhere for his reason to dance.

As far as I can see, the only place left to turn is the desire that generated reasons to take all the insufficient means to dancing, viz., Ronnie's desire to dance. So, how about it: Is there a true proposition that explains why Ronnie's dancing promotes the proposition that he dances?

There is no doubt that Ronnie's dancing makes it more likely that he dances – his dancing transparently and (at least partly) constitutively makes it the case that he dances. To identify a reason to dance, however, the theory wants an explanation of the fact that Ronnie's dancing makes it more likely that he dances (than doing nothing). What about a proposition about that very fact itself: *Ronnie's dancing makes it more likely that Ronnie dances* (bringing the probability to 1)? If this is to work, then it is possible for the fact that  $p$  to qualify as an explanation of  $p$ . Though initial intuitions on this possibility are not favorable, Schroeder can claim that propositions about facts, or facts themselves, are limiting cases of explanations of the facts expressed, or trivial explanations of the facts expressed that we are normally not interested in (31, personal communication).

But if the fact that  $p$  is a trivial, uninteresting explanation of  $p$ , then we should find it rather obvious and inane to point it out *qua* explanation. Do we? Take the non-normative case where we are considering what explains the fact that Joe is six feet tall. If I offer up that *Joe is six feet tall*, I take it that my audience won't find this to be an obvious, trivial or inane explanation. I have merely restated the explanandum rather than cited some explanan, so what I have offered is no explanation at all, let alone a trivial one. The same goes for Ronnie's case. The fact that *Ronnie's dancing makes it more likely that Ronnie*

*dances* in no way explains the fact expressed.<sup>4</sup> We have not yet found a reason for Ronnie to dance.

How about this explanation: the fact that *Ronnie's dancing makes it the case that he dances* explains why Ronnie's dancing makes it more likely that he dances. As far as I can see, this (proposition about a) metaphysical constitution relation is the only thing that comes close to explaining why Ronnie's dancing would make it more likely that he dances. Let us suppose it qualifies as an explanation on Schroeder's metaphysical use of the term.

Unfortunately, this does not look recognizable as a reason for Ronnie to dance. Suppose someone were to ask Ronnie what reason he has to dance. Would he reply, "Well, by dancing I make it the case that I dance"? If he did, one would think he was being evasive, and they might press him further: "Well, what reason do you have to make it the case that you dance?" No one else would ascribe such a reason to Ronnie, and this failure of ascription cannot be explained away on pragmatic grounds.<sup>5</sup>

Further, Hypotheticalism was supposed to be superior to other Humean views because it avoided the following objection (see 26-29):

1. If X is deliberating well, X is thinking about X's reasons. (Deliberative Constraint)
2. X's desires are reasons, or parts of reasons. (No Background Conditions)
3. So if X is deliberating well, X is thinking about X's desires.

Schroeder takes this conclusion to be objectionably self-regarding. Agents do not need to be thinking about their desires to deliberate well. In particular,

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<sup>4</sup> Quite generally, I find it difficult to think of a case where the proposition that *p* explains *p*. At the very least, Hypotheticalism owes us an account of how "explanation" is being used in the theory so that more intuitive explanations, such as the fact that *there is dancing at the party*, and citations of explananda, such as the fact that *Ronnie's dancing makes it more likely that Ronnie dances*, both count as explanans in a non-*ad-hoc* way. It would be *ad hoc*, for instance, to define a Hypotheticalist explanation of *p* disjunctively, as either an explanation under ordinary conceptions, or the true proposition that *p*. I anticipate that other candidate "explanations" not covered here will have trouble answering to our ordinary conceptions of what an explanation is.

<sup>5</sup> Here is a related peculiarity. It looks like (propositions about) the laws of nature will often count as reasons. Because the laws of nature are involved when actions cause outcomes, they (or propositions about them) will often help to explain why actions make the objects of desires more likely. I find this to be a particularly unattractive version of the too many reasons objection.

Ronnie need not think about his desire that he dance to deliberate well. Hypotheticalism avoids the argument by rejecting No Background Conditions.

But Hypotheticalism fares worse by the lights of an exactly analogous argument. For it is far more objectionable to require that Ronnie think about the metaphysical fact that *by dancing he dances* to deliberate well. However self-regarding it might be for Ronnie to think of his desire to dance, better to require that than to require him to be metaphysical-constitution-relation regarding. The point here is not to defend the Deliberative Constraint, but to point out that it provides a better argument against Hypotheticalism than its rivals, at least as regards reasons to do things that directly satisfy one's desires. In those circumstances, the reasons cited by traditional Humean views – that Ronnie wants to dance, that he would find it pleasurable, etc. – fare better than the reasons cited by Hypotheticalism.

I hope it is clear that the problem generalizes. Assuming no other relevant desires are involved, if I desire to read, could it be that my only reason to do so is that by reading I make it the case that I read? If you want to rescue your spouse from a lake, is your only reason to do so that by rescuing him/her you thereby make it the case that you rescue him/her?

## Conclusion

If X has a non-derivative desire that p, an adequate Humean view should ensure that X has some reason to perform those actions that directly make it the case that p. Those reasons should be plausible, and not forced upon us to make the theory work. As far as I can see, however, Hypotheticalism would have us believe that X's reasons to perform such actions would derive from desires other than the desire that p, which leaves it vulnerable to unintelligible possibilities where there are no relevant other desires, or it would find reasons in (true propositions about) metaphysical constitution relations between actions and facts about actions. At the very least, this requires more explanation, and it looks doubtful that this is an improvement on traditional Humean views.

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