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The Indeterminacy of Desire and Practical Reason

1) Introduction

Bernard Williams has famously argued that all reasons for action are internal reasons.[1] The internalist requirement on reasons is that all reasons must be linked to the agent's subjective motivational state by a sound deliberative route. This argument has been the subject of a great deal of debate. In this paper I wish to draw attention to a much less discussed aspect of Williams' papers on internalism. Williams believes that there is an essential indeterminacy regarding what an agent has a reason to do. In this paper I explain indeterminacy in practical reason and give a qualified defense of it. I argue that indeterminacy has two sources according to Williams. One source is that deliberation is guided by imagination, not by rules. The second is that agent's motivational set can be indeterminate. I do not attempt to evaluate or defend the first sort of indeterminacy. Rather, I argue that even if we reject this sort of indeterminacy we are still left with the indeterminacy of desire. The indeterminacy of desire sheds light on some little discussed problems in practical reason.

The indeterminacy of desire points to the fact that agents have to solve constitutive questions about their subjective motivational set (or their S in Williams' shorthand). Sometimes agents must shape their motivations by deciding what kind of person to be. I will not attempt to show how this can be done in a rational manner in this paper. I am content to draw attention to the issue. I argue that indeterminacy creates serious problems for some prominent accounts of practical reason. In particular, Michael Smith and Christine Korsgaard introduce formal constraints on the permissibility of desire to guide practical reason. I think that in many cases individuals have motivational content that is too unsettled for these constraints to do the work that is needed. I will

argue for this largely by example. Of course, the case will not be conclusive, but I think indeterminacy offers a straightforward explanation of some central features of practical thought.

2) Williams on Indeterminacy

Williams' basic position on internalism is that for a consideration to be a reason it must be possible for an agent to be motivated to act on that consideration by undergoing a process of rational deliberation. If a rational agent could not be motivated to act on a consideration, then that consideration is not a reason because it could not explain the agent's action. It is not clear what this rules out and I will not try to settle that issue here.[2] However, internalism, by itself, does not pose a threat to rationalist accounts of morality. As Korsgaard has shown, the internalist requirement on reasons does not refute ethical theories, it merely makes a "psychological demand on them".[3] Whether internalism results in a position that is skeptical about the force of reason in morality will depend on how one fills out what constitutes a 'sound deliberative route'. Practical rationality might constrain deliberation in such a way that makes internalism compatible with a Kantian picture of morality. For instance, Korsgaard and Smith insist that practical reason requires an element of universalizability that insures moral requirements are binding on all agents. Williams is skeptical of such positions. We should note though that in his papers on internalism Williams does not present an argument against such positions, he just doubts that they can be made out clearly. Williams says, "Someone who claims the constraints of morality are themselves built into the notion of what it is to be rational deliberator cannot get that conclusion for nothing".[4] Korsgaard and Smith do not attempt to get the conclusion for nothing, but I will not assess their attempts here.

Williams account of a sound deliberative route is intentionally vague and imprecise. He wants to allow for any number of possibilities in deliberation. I believe this is because Williams thinks it is impossible to give a full and detailed account of what practical reason consists in. In

fact, it would be a mistake to interpret Williams as offering a procedural account of practical reason if that means there is some single procedure that constrains deliberation. Williams does not believe any such procedure exists. He argues that, "there is an essential indeterminacy in what can be counted a rational deliberative process".[5] He offers a partial list of the possibilities for deliberation that includes "thinking how the satisfaction of elements in S can be combined, e.g. by time-ordering; where there is some irresoluble conflict among the elements of S … finding constitutive solutions, such as deciding what would make for an entertaining evening, granted that one wants entertainment".[6] But, this in not intended as an exhaustive list. Williams wants his account to be vague because he believes it is simply indeterminate what we have a reason to do. On the connection between blame and having a reason Williams says, "In both the cases … the vagueness or indeterminacy that follows from the internalist account matches, as it seems to me, a vagueness or indeterminacy that is a genuine feature of our practice and experience".[7] Williams would argue that a theory that gave exacting standards for practical reason would fail to capture something important about the nature of deliberation.

It is open to a critic of Williams to argue that there is no such indeterminacy, but let us first set out Williams' explanation of it. Williams argues that the indeterminacy has two sources. The first is that rational deliberation depends upon what considerations are brought to the agent's mind. For instance, Williams thinks that imagination plays a crucial role in rational deliberation, but imagination is a creative and explorative process the outcome of which cannot be known beforehand. Williams says, "it is impossible that it should be fully determinate what imagination might contribute to a deliberation".[8] Call this indeterminacy in procedure. Before examining the details of this claim let me note the second source, indeterminacy of desire, which will receive greater attention later in this paper. Desire is a source of indeterminacy according to Williams

because "it may be indeterminate what the condition of agent's S relevantly is".[9] Our motivational make-up may not be completely settled. What we have a reason to do will vary depending on how these different indeterminacies get filled out.

Indeterminacy in procedure concerns what might rationally influence an agent during deliberation. At one point Williams describes some of the possibilities of rational deliberation as "invention of alternatives … breaking out of a dilemma … perception of unexpected similarities".[10] These are all cases where one cannot simply be guided by a principle. Williams seems to understand deliberation as a creative process, not a procedure in which an agent transforms desires by applying principles to initial motivations. Rather an agent casts about in his imagination testing out possible solutions to the problems as they present themselves. On such an account it would seem that agents with exactly similar motivations might hit on equally good, but incompatible solutions to the same problem. This might be because an interesting analogy occurs to one, while the other is moved by a compelling work of art. Williams seems to leave all these as open possibilities. There is any number of options and the agent just has to carry on with his deliberation until he sees where it leads him. The only requirement seems to be that the agent keeps thinking until he finds an answer that is acceptable to him.

Deliberation also has a social aspect. How we see our world and how we see ourselves will be effected by how others perceive us. What considerations are brought to mind will depend upon social influences. Agents who are exposed to different viewpoints might find deliberation leads them in different directions. Furthermore, advice might make us rethink the situation that faces us. For instance, Williams claims that in some cases blame consists in "a proleptic invocation of a reason to do or not do a certain thing, which applies in virtue of a disposition to have the respect of other people".[11] When those we admire blame us, that might lead us to change our S in order to be

admired by them. The moral responses of others might change our evaluations. Given that it is not fixed whom we will interact with and how we will respond to them, this yields another variety of indeterminacy in procedure.

Of course, Kantian internalists and a whole host of reason externalists will deny that the principles of rationality are so imprecise. To adjudicate this dispute we would have to look at particular proposals for practical reason. A rationalist would need to show her account withstood critical attack to refute Williams' skepticism. Depending on the particulars, this may not be a threat to internalism.[12] However, it would be a threat to the indeterminacy of deliberative principles that Williams takes to be support for internalism. I will put this issue to one side. Instead, I will focus on a different problem in practical reason. Most rationalist accounts attempt to introduce formal constraints on desires to yield an account of reasons. I think such accounts run afoul of the second sort of indeterminacy that Williams points to in his discussions of internalism. Agent's desires can be indeterminate and as such do not have the proper content to be manipulated by formal principles. To introduce this problem I will need to briefly discuss Michael Smith's account of reasons in his book *The Moral Problem*.

3) Smith on 'our fully rational selves'

Smith accepts the internalist requirement on reasons, but takes issue with Williams' account of deliberation. As we have seen, imagination plays a key role in Williams' account. Smith grants that imagination might play a role, but claims "by far the most important way in which we create new and destroy old underived desires when we deliberate is by trying to find out whether our desires are systematically justifiable"[13]. The claim seems to be that a primary task of practical reason is to see whether particular desires are themselves desirable. We can accomplish this by employing a method of systematic justification. This involves constructing what our fully rational

selves would tell us to do in the actual circumstances we are in. For instance, our fully rational selves will not think we should be guided by fleeting desires that are the product of fear, frustration, or anger. More importantly, when deliberating about a particular desire we should try to "integrate the object of that desire into a more coherent and unified desiderative profile and evaluative outlook".[14] This process of striving for coherence and unity will leaves us with desires that are likely to be rationally superior to those we start with in deliberation.

It is rational to acquire new desires on this model if by adding them to our desire set it becomes more systematically justifiable. A new desire makes the set more systematically justifiable if it justifies and explains some other desire. In this way it would make our subjective motivational set more coherent and unified. For example, take an agent who desires that her children get a good education. Imagine this desire does not stem from any other desire the agent has, as such it is unconnected to other elements in her web of desires. It would have more rational support if it were connected to other desires the agent has, like her desire that her children live well. Furthermore, the desire would have greater rational support if it fit with a more general desire. The agent might see that her specific desire would cohere better if she adopted a general desire that all children get a good education. Smith claims that in adopting a more general desire an agent might realize that her new imagined desire set is better "for we may properly regard the unity of a set of desires as a virtue, a virtue that in turn makes for the rationality of set as a whole".[15] If the belief that the new imagined desires is rationally superior to her present set leads her to change her desires she has done so through a rational process.

By an analogous process one can come to give up old desires. If desires must be systematically justifiable and coherence is a key to this process, then some desires may be rationally given up when it is believed they do not cohere well with others. Imagine our above

agent has a desire that none of her tax money is spent on education outside her child's school district. Upon reflection she sees that this desire does not cohere well with other desires. When such a desire has no connection with the rest of her desires it might seem *ad hoc* and not justifiable. Or the desire might be in conflict with some other desire she has. If she changes her desires for either of these reasons it is a change by a rational process.

There is much to admire in Smith's account. Nevertheless, there are problems. An agent might desire to have sexual relations only with members of the opposite sex. This seems to be just a brute desire that meets of no justification. I suppose an agent might adopt the more general desire that all agents only have sexual relations with the opposite sex in order to explain and justify his original desire. Some people do seem to reason this way, but I think it is misguided. Problems along these lines echo Kant's problem regarding how we formulate the maxims for the test of universalizabilty. The moral rationalist needs to specify how to get the content of the proposition for her particular test of rationality. Otherwise, the formal constraints do no good.

More importantly, it is unclear when coherence is a virtue and when it is a vice. Sometimes an evaluative outlook that is perfectly coherent and unified signifies an insufficient grasp of what life has to offer rather than a model or rationality. As David Wiggins remarks concerning the considerations of practical reason "It is of the essence of these concerns to make competing and inconsistent claims. This is a mark not of human irrationality but of human rationality in the face of the plurality of human goods".[16] It seems unavoidable that a complete absence of tension would be irrational in some cases if one accepts that this is a world of plural and conflicting values. I do not have a knockdown argument for the existence of plural and conflicting values, but it does ring true. It does not seem that there is anything irrational about being drawn to both work and play at the same time. Being solely concerned with work would make one a bit of a bore and probably result in

a less enjoyable life. So it seems in some cases the existence of tension in an agent's motivational makeup signifies not a lack of rationality, but an appropriate sensitivity to what life has to offer.

Smith is only offering a summary style analysis of "fully rational", so perhaps other platitudes about practical reason will inform us in what way our desire sets ought to be coherent and unified. I do not wish to try to settle the question whether those principles are rationally binding in an informative way. What I think is important is that these principles, even if they are right, do not do anywhere near all the work needed in practical reason. On Smith's account our reasons are what our fully rational selves would advise us to do. I will argue that because of the indeterminacy of desire there are different fully rational selves we might become. This will be the case when agents are undecided as to what to pursue in life. In such circumstances agents will be asking, if only implicitly, what type of person should I be? Since we are asking what makes an agent ideal, this cannot be answered by asking what our fully rational selves would advise us to do. This is just the same question over again. We need to face the fact that we do not as yet know what our fully rational selves are like head on.

4) Indeterminacy of Desire

Before arguing for the indeterminacy of desire I need to say a few words about the nature of desire. I use the term 'desire' to cover all pro-attitudes. In some contexts this would be unwise because there are important differences between 'hoping that X ' and 'desiring that X '. However, I am not here giving a fine-grained analysis of all mental states. Rather I aim to establish one possible feature of the set of intentional states that accompany belief to produce action. I do not think this begs any substantive question in philosophical psychology. One could accept this claim and still be an externalist about moral motivation or reasons.[17] If we can adopt desires simply in virtue of an evaluative belief, then it is even compatible with rejecting a Humean theory of

motivation.[18] All I am maintaining is that in deliberation an agent must have some motivational states to reason from to get to others. On this account desires are intentional states with a world to mind direction of fit. I do not offer direction of fit as a definition or a complete explanation of desire. Rather, it is one central aspect of desire that any theory of the mind must account for.

Smith has argued persuasively for why we should reject a phenomenological account of desire and instead adopt a direction of fit account.[19] If we claim that desires have an essential phenomenological component, then the epistemology of desire becomes analogous to the epistemology of sensation. Sensations have an essential phenomenological aspect, which seems to make it impossible to be mistaken about the content of sensation. An agent is sensing red only if he believes he is having what we would call a red-like experience. We are infallible in the epistemology of our own sensation. Such infallibility is wildly implausible in the case of desire. Agents are often mistaken about what they desire. What we care about or what we most want can be deeply mysterious to us.

In place of a phenomenological account we need a more complicated account of desire that includes direction of fit. Desires have world to mind direction of fit, while beliefs have mind to world direction of fit. Beliefs represent the world. Desires offer conceptions of how we might like the world to be. A desire dictates that the some aspect of the world should be made to fit what the mind conceives. A mental state that is a belief is supposed to fit the world. As such, beliefs and desires have very different relationships with other mental states. Suppose that you desire P. Now if you believe not P is the case that, by itself, will not necessarily diminish your desire for P. Now suppose you believe P. Clearly, you cannot maintain that belief if you come to believe not P. As such desires and beliefs function differently in our mental life. This is not an entirely satisfactory account of the difference between beliefs and desires, because we have used beliefs to explain

desires. No matter, all we want in a theory of practical reason is some core account of desire. I take it that any theory of the mind would need to make sense of this feature of desires, which suggests we have a workable and somewhat uncontroversial account of desire.

Desire as direction of fit is best understood as a disposition. Other things being equal, a desire to excel at philosophy disposes one to carefully study the work of great philosophers. This is far from an illuminating account of that desire and much more would need to be said about the functional role desires play. The epistemology of desire now becomes an epistemology of dispositions. This will be a process of assessing the truth of counterfactuals.

In claiming that desires are indeterminate I mean that there is no fact of the matter as to what the agent desires or most desires. An agent's motivational makeup may have elements whose content is unsettled or lacks determinate weight. Shortly I will turn to some examples to help illustrate the indeterminacy of desire. Now though I would like to point out the indeterminacy of desire is entailed by the conjunction of our dispositional analysis of desire and one very plausible assumption about counterfactuals. Having a desire is being disposed to make the world fit that desire in appropriate circumstances. Specifying the exact functional role of a desire will be extremely difficult and depend on the truth of various counterfactuals, but we can imagine how such a process can be worked out. Suppose I say 'Sally desires Sue's companionship'. Now if Sally flees the room every time Sue enters it, it seems likely that my claim is false.[20] Smith thinks this account also sheds light on how desires can have propositional content because "the propositional content of a desire may then simply be determined by its functional role".[21] So, it seems that whether one has a desire and the particular content of that desire depends upon the way one behaves and the truth of some counterfactuals.

Our plausible assumption about counterfactuals that entails indeterminacy is that some counterfactuals are neither true nor false. Making this assumption commits us to denying conditional excluded middle. Fortunately, David Lewis has already provided a way for us to understand this. He has argued that the truth of a counterfactual depends upon the truth of that statement in the nearest possible world where the antecedent is true.[22] For some counterfactuals there may be a tie for the nearest possible world. If these worlds give conflicting answers, then the counterfactual is neither true nor false. To borrow an example from Lewis, the counterfactual 'if Bizet and Verdi were compatriots, Bizet would be Italian' is neither true nor false. There are worlds equally similar to this one in which Bizet and Verdi were Italian compatriots and ones in which Bizet and Verdi were non-Italian compatriots. In the case of practical choices when an agent wonders do I prefer A to B, it may simply be indeterminate what the answer is. Borrowing from Smith's model, we might say there is more than one possible world that contains a fully rational counterpart of ourselves. Sometimes these fully rational counterparts might disagree on what is to be done. As such, there are constitutive elements of ourselves that need to be settled to decide which of these idealized individuals we should become.

5) An Argument from the Phenomenology of Deliberation

So far I have offered a model for how desires might be indeterminate. This model depends upon some plausible, but by no means certain, accounts of desire and counterfactuals. I could offer a further defense of those positions, but I think looking at our practical experience makes a stronger case for the indeterminacy of desire. I offer the indeterminacy of desire as the best explanation of some very hard cases of deliberation. Imagine a man has been cheating on his wife, but has resolved not to see his lover anymore.[23] However, after some time he gives into his passions and goes to see her. Is this action rational or not? I am inclined to think that we have not been given

sufficient information to answer this question. Whether it is rational seems to depend in part on whom he ultimately ends up with. If his passion for his new lover fades quickly, it may be that he should have seen that this was just an infatuation. However, if he leaves his wife and lives happily ever after, then perhaps he was acting reasonably. Now, this does not mean that we have to know the future in order to have a reason for action. One can certainly act with reason, but still have things turn out poorly because of the unpredictable element in life. However, I do not think that the agent's deliberation is simply a cost-benefit analysis of likely consequences. It is not as if when agents make such decisions they notice some factor they forget to add to their list of pros and cons. Instead, the agent must settle on whom it is he truly loves. In many cases this will not be a process of discovery by introspection. While the agent deliberates, there may be no psychological state that determines whether this action was rational or not. The desires of the agent may very well be indeterminate at the moment at hand. That is likely what makes such decisions so hard and troubling.

One might protest that cases like this, while familiar, are better explained epistemologically. In such cases it may be that the man cannot for some reason see that his wife is unhappy and that this will eventually make him profoundly unhappy. Years from now he might be able to look back and see this. I will gladly grant that these sorts of cases exist, but I see no reason to think all cases must fit this model. A man may be torn between two loves and know that he must choose one if he is to have either. To insist there is always a fact of the matter about whom a person truly loves or ought to end up with seems overly romantic. In fact, retrospective judgements about these cases might be rationalizations so that we can better make sense of our lives. There is likely distinct psychological pressure to makes sense of these choices later in life. So, such judgements might not be informed hindsight, but rather an inaccurate and self-serving recollection.

Others critics might deny that such cases are possible. One might claim that if what I say is true then we should expect to find individuals paralyzed as a result of deliberation. If desires were indeterminate in the way I suggest then wouldn't we all be like Buridian's ass who starves to death because he has no reason to choose between two equally attractive and available stacks of hay? However, the objection continues, this is not what we find. Individuals do decide to either stay with their lover or not. If there is no fact of the matter as to what they prefer, then they would never choose. As a response let me first say that I think there are cases where agents are paralyzed by deliberation. Even after extensive weighing of options many of us have probably thought 'I simply do not know what to do'. Yet, we eventually decide to do something and I certainly could not disagree with that. All I am arguing is that we do not uncover some desire we have for some reason forgotten to factor into our earlier calculation. Instead, agents faced with this problem engage in some different kind of reasoning.[24] One hypothesis is that when we act rationally in such dilemmas we resolve to be a certain kind of agent. Most of us are probably familiar with agents who do this either wisely or foolishly. Which suggests to me that there is some standard to be met.

6) Two Kinds, Two Levels, and Two More Examples

I would now like to briefly catalogue some different kinds of indeterminacy. I think there can be two kinds of indeterminacy; one stemming from content of the desire, the other from the weight attached to desire. It will be helpful to separate these in theory even if we cannot in practice. In some cases one may have a desire without that desire have entirely specific propositional content. Desire might be somewhat fuzzy as it were, requiring that we specify what we want. The other sort of indeterminacy stems from the relative weight of a desire. For any number of options it may be indeterminate what one would be willing to forgo for that desire. At one end of the scale

this will concern whether the agent has any desire whatsoever for the object, while at the other end are desires one is willing to sacrifice anything for.

Indeterminacy might also arise at two different levels. Indeterminacy might simply be the function of one desire or it might arise at a step above from the interaction between more than one desire. Again these may be very hard to isolate in real life, but I think it is worthwhile to keep these in mind in a philosophical discussion. I will illustrate these kinds of indeterminacy with examples that I hope are familiar enough to serve as more data to be explained by indeterminacy. I take it that these examples and other analogous cases to be common place elements of practical life.

Consider the case of the indeterminacy of a single desire first. When I first began graduate school I had a desire to be a philosopher, but that desire was indeterminate. Now this might plausibly be subsumed under the heading of means-ends reasoning, where I see if my desire to become a philosopher outweighs my aversion to trying to clearly state the arguments for and against the Myth of the Given. However, I think it is a little odd to conceive the desire to think clearly as somehow distinct from the desire to be a philosopher. Rather, such capacities are partly constitutive of being a philosopher. More appropriately, the end of being a philosopher includes a set of different abilities and part of my graduate education was coming to see whether I had the necessary desires to develop some essential subset of those abilities. Does that mean when someone asked me in my first year of graduate school whether I desired to be a philosopher I should have responded 'I am still trying to figure that out'? Well, that response would not have been out place, but neither is a straightforward 'Yes'. After all, I would not have given up a good job and moved half way across the country for something I wasn't sure I wanted. I did have the desire, but it was indeterminate. On some occasions an agent can have a desire without that desire having entirely

specific content. Sometimes we have distinct cravings, but we also have desires that are broad and diffuse.

One might protest that indeterminacy will be resolved if we focus on the world and what has value. I agree that indeterminacy can be settled, but not always by simply examining what has value. That is because we are faced with a world of plural and conflicting values, which can be a source of indeterminacy that arises at the level of a desire set as a whole. Imagine an undergraduate student with amazing philosophical ability. Say we are fairly confident, although there are no guarantees, that with the right education he could produce work on par with that of David Lewis. However, this young man is also the star of the basketball team and has a lucrative future in professional sports. In all likelihood if he does not continue his education now he will never reach his intellectual potential. What does the young man have most reason to do? I would argue that both of these forms of life are worthwhile undertakings. In assessing his options he will want to factor in his present desires, those certainly are not irrelevant. But, he also needs to reason about what kinds of desires he might wish to cultivate. His deliberation should involve trying to understand what type of life will be the most fulfilling, where this includes coming to understand what he means by the word of 'fulfilling'. The young man has to decide what type of individual he wants to be.

This might seem like a unique case we shouldn't place too much emphasis on. However, I claim only the level of ability is unique. Most of us possess a set of skills that could be utilized in very different kinds of life. So, I think the problem is perfectly general. There are also parallel problems in tragic situations were one has to choose between two evil or equally undesirable options. Related problems arise for issues more limited in scope. Perhaps, we have not settled what it means to have a desirable relationship or an enjoyable retirement.

7) *The Implications of Indeterminacy*

What exactly does this show? It at least shows that the question of the rational justification of morality is not the only important question in practical reason. Practical reason concerns far more than the constraints of morality. For most of us wanton cruelty or absolute moral indifference is not on the deliberative map. Yet, we are still faced with practical questions that are not settled by instrumental or prudential reasoning. Moral reasons, instrumental reasons, and prudential reasons do not exhaust the reasons we have for action. We also seek reasons for adopting some particular projects and conception of the good life. The indeterminacy of desire shows that no set of formal principles will answer all the questions that are of interest in practical reason. The content of our motivational states at the moment of deliberation may be too impoverished for formal principles to do the all work that is needed.

One might think that Korsgaard has the tools to get out of this problem. Korsgaard argues that the structure of self-consciousness forces us to act and deliberate under a self-conception she calls practical identity. She says this self-conception is "a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking".[25] Practical identities will include things like being someone's child, a philosopher, a member of a religious group, and many other things. One's reasons for action will, in part, be determined by your practical identity. That is because a practical identity partly determines the content of one's deliberation. It structures the concerns and desires that present themselves to the agent. As such, practical identity brings content to the formal principles Korsgaard employs in practical reason. Therefore, it might be a way to answer the questions I have been raising.

Korsgaard defends a broadly Kantian position. When agents deliberate the reflective distance created by self-consciousness forces them to examine whether their impulses are reasons for action. While deliberating the agent must side with some particular consideration that presents itself as a motivation. The agent must decide if the maxim proposed by some aspect of a practical identity can be willed in accord with the Kantian imperatives. If they can, then these maxims can be laws the agent acts on. They can be willed in the universal sense. If they cannot fit the Kantian imperatives, then we have an obligation not to perform them. These formal principles separate maxims into the permissible and the impermissible. It appears one's practical identity determines what one ought to do in the sphere of the permissible.

Again, let us put aside the question regarding whether the formal principles Korsgaard puts forth for are established by her argument. Instead, I wish to argue that practical identities cannot do all the work required to solve the problem I am raising. It may be that practical identities are indeterminate in just the way desires are. In that case we have made no progress at all. If they are not indeterminate, it seems to me that they are conceptually downstream from the problems I am addressing.

To see this consider how we should understand Korsgaard's practical identities.[26] Are they simply given or are they the product of our conscious choices? Korsgaard writes that, "Our contingent practical identities are, to some extent, given to us – by our cultures, by our societies and their role structures, by the accidents of birth, and by our natural abilities – but it is also clear that we enter into their constitution".[27] Korsgaard has to say this given her insistence that the structure of human consciousness can create reflexive distance from any particular concern. So it would seem we have to stand back from our practical identities and decide to adopt or create them. Here the problem under discussion crops up. Most of us are faced with choices between different

practical identities that fall within the bounds of the moral permissibility. But, that does not mean that nothing important hinges on the decision. Choosing a career or a mate is a decision that is important and perplexing. An account of practical reason should have something to say about it. One cannot sidestep this problem with an appeal to practical identity. Often, agents will need to decide what practical identity to adopt. They may be wondering whether to be a monk or a banker or an artist. To reply by saying they should be guided by the obligations that are constitutive of their practical identity is unhelpful. It assumes the question is answered, it does not answer it.

Our motivational makeup does not always provide sufficient data to determine what we have a reason to do. It is not clear to me how common this is. I imagine it is fairly infrequent, but I do not think that diminishes its importance. Sometimes the content of our desires is very precise, such as when something sharp and painful is digging into our foot. Naturally, we remove the cause of our pain. However, the action that results hardly seems the product of deliberation. Indeed, I think the more specific our desire set the less need for deliberation. Harry Frankfurt reminds us that deliberation is in an important sense *de-liberation*.[28] On my preferred account it is an activity where some measure of freedom is lost because some alternatives become ruled out. It is an attempt to rationally constrain our choice. It is most difficult where we do not know what considerations properly constrain our judgements. Which suggests to me that cases I have discussed is where deliberation is most important. A more adequate conception of practical reason would address the constitutive question about what kind of agent to be.[29]

[1] Williams first makes the argument in "Internal and External Reasons" in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 101-113. Williams further discusses it in "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame" in his *Making Sense of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 35-45. He offers a reply to John McDowell in Altham, J.E.J. and Ross Harrison, eds. *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). His final contribution on the subject appears "Some Further Notes on Internal and External Reasons" in Millgram, Elijah ed. *Varieties of Practical Reasoning.* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) 91-97.

[2] T.M. Scanlon's does an admirable job clarifying this issue in his appendix on Williams in *What We Owe to Each Other*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998) 363-373.

[3] Page 23 in her "Skepticism about Practical Reason" *Journal of Philosophy* 1986, 83:5-25.

[4] Williams 1995, 37. Also see Williams' discussion of "broadly Kantian" approaches in Williams (2001) 93-94.

[5] Williams 1981, 110

[6] Williams 1981, 104

[7] Williams 1995, 43

[8] Williams 1995, 38

[9] Williams 1995, 38

[10] Williams 1995, 38

[11] Williams 1995, 41

[12] If Korsgaard or Smith's position were to withstand skeptical attack, then that would yield a variety of internalism.

[13] In his *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 158-9. By 'underived' desires Smith means desires that are not derived from other desires.

[14] Smith 1994, 159

[15] Smith 1994, 159

[16] At page 145 in "Deliberation and Practical Reason" in *Practical Reasoning* ed. Joseph Raz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 144-152

[17] For instance, it seems compatible with Nick Zangwill's position in "Moral Motivational Externalism" *American Philosophical Quarterly* Volume, 40, No. 2 2003 143-154 and Alan Gibbard's reason externalism in "Reasons and Thin and Thick" *Journal of Philosophy* Vol. C, No. 6 2003 288-304.

[18] See R. Jay Wallace "How to Argue about Practical Reason" *Mind,* Vol. 99 1990, 355-385 for an account of how this position might be worked out.

[19] Smith 1994, 92-129. Smith sometimes seems to take direction of fit as an exhaustive account of desire. As I stated earlier, I take it only to be one element of the nature of desire.

[20] Of course, given the complexity of human psychology this isn't always definitive evidence. One can imagine other beliefs and desires that might still make my ascription plausible.

[21] Smith 1994, 119.

[22] In his *Counterfactuals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973). See p. 79-83 for discussion of the denial of conditional excluded middle.

[23] A similar example is in Bernard Williams *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1993) p. 44-46. Williams uses the example in an attempt to show that akrasia is an ethical concept, not a psychological one.

[24] Michael Bratman discusses the importnace of Buridan cases to practical reason in his *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), especially p. 22-23.

[25] Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) p. 101

[26] Thomas Nagel raises a similar point in his reply to Korsgaard in Korsgaard 1996 at page 204. Also note that when I discuss practical identity I mean in it the sense of a rich self-conception. Korsgaard goes on to argue that we all have the practical identity of being human or a citizen in the kingdom of ends. I take that to be to devoid of content to handle the problems under discussion.

[27] Korsgaard 1996, 239

[28] In his "Identification and Wholeheartedness" in *The Importance of What We Care About* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 175.

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