

Book Review

Reasons from Within: Desires and Values, by Alan H. Goldman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 288. H/b £48.00

Goldman's objective is to take a stand on two debates. The debate is between internalists and externalists concerning reasons. 'Internalists hold that the reasons we have for acting are limited by our pre-existing motivational states ... Externalists deny such limitation, holding that reasons determine what we ought to do whether we care to do so ... or not' (p. 9). The other debate is between subjectivists and objectivists about value. Goldman takes these two debates to be the same debate: 'Reasons exist independently of persons' motivations or concerns if and only if values or normative facts exist independently of persons' evaluations or valuing, as what they ought to value whether or not they do so' (p. 11). Thus, a reasons externalist is also an objectivist about values. In his book, Goldman himself offers a thorough defense of reasons internalism and subjectivism about values, 'the view that all practical reasons derive ultimately from our concerns' (p. 20).

For Goldman, reasons are states of affairs (such as a tennis racquet's being on sale being a reason to visit a shop). But, crucially, these states of affairs are not intrinsically reasons: if I did not enjoy tennis, or did not need a racquet, then this state of affairs would not constitute a reason for me. Thus, our desires and concerns constitute states of affairs as reasons. Consequently, a state of affairs can only constitute an F reason for a person if one has the relevant set of concerns (if one is 'F-minded'), where 'F' can be moral, prudential, religious, aesthetic, athletic, or whatever.

Goldman straight off tackles a number of objections. First, Thomas Scanlon and Warren Quinn have argued that desires do not in themselves give us any reason for action. Quinn's argument is typical: a person's compulsive desire to turn on radios gives the person no reason at all to do this. Scanlon argues that, for example, when I desire to buy a new computer, it is not my desire that gives me a reason to purchase the machine, but whatever features the object has that will allow it to serve my purposes and needs. Scanlon thus locates reason-constitutingness in the object, its role in my life and projects, etc., and not in my desires.

Goldman's reply to this line of objection is multi-pronged. First, it is not desires simpliciter that give rise to reasons; rather, it is our 'coherent and informed sets of desires' (p. 95) which give rise to reasons. (Goldman argues

that coherence and information constitute rationality in practical reason, an argument I sadly do not have the space to detail.) An isolated desire, unconnected to our deeper concerns or life projects (and perhaps in conflict with these) is indeed not reason-giving. Second, he argues that just as belief has the natural aim of truth, desires ‘aim at their own satisfaction, and their natural function is to prompt actions in accord with the reasons that indicate how to satisfy them’ (p. 183). This, Goldman thinks, gives a naturalistic account of the normative demands of practical rationality; and in line with such demands, it barely even makes sense to ask whether we have a reason to satisfy our deepest concerns and the desires that give rise to them: ‘To me, it is not an open question whether I have reason to do what will fulfill my coherent, informed, prioritized sets of motivations, containing my deepest concerns and specifications of ways of satisfying them ... we can no more ask whether we should act to fulfill our deepest concerns than we can ask whether we should believe what seems true on all the available evidence’ (pp. 184, 257).

For Goldman, no specific set of concerns is rationally mandatory — not moral concerns, not even narrowly prudential concerns (ones that make essential reference to oneself), although it is for Goldman a conceptual truth that we act in our broad self-interest, that is, that we act on our concerns and desires. Goldman’s discussion of whether moral concerns are rationally required is particularly illuminating, and includes a nice discussion of David Wiggins and John McDowell’s attempt to give an objective, yet response-dependent account of morality. As Goldman emphasizes again and again, we don’t have or need reasons for our deepest concerns; rather, they are the source of reasons.

Goldman argues that his account has a number of advantages over objective theories of reason and value. Some of his arguments will seem familiar, others less so; but the overall case he makes is compelling. Harkening back to Mackie’s queerness objection, Goldman asks how, if values are objective and in no way connected to our concerns and desires, they are supposed to motivate us. But for Goldman, if ‘we come to see certain facts as reasons when they indicate how to satisfy our desires ... [then] it is not mysterious how reasons motivate us and how we know they are reasons’ (p. 20). Further, how can such an objective fact have normative significance? That just seems like excess metaphysical baggage. If, on the other hand, we can say that it is good to satisfy desires, and that ‘rational desires create subjective value and in themselves determine how we rationally ought to act’ (p. 230), then adding a layer of objective value on (to the satisfaction of desires, or pleasure, or any factual state) is ‘superfluous from a practical point of view’ (p. 230) and objectionable from a metaphysical point of view.

For Goldman, subjectivism is also more faithful to the phenomenology of our actual lives. For example, Goldman argues that we do not take care of our children, choose leisure activities, pursue particular careers, etc., because we

think these things are objectively valuable to do. Rather, we pursue personal goals and seek fulfillment through these. 'Our own good', writes Goldman, 'is defined largely by the satisfaction of these partial concerns' (p. 194), and not by pursuit of objective good. Indeed, when we encounter value in the world, we typically encounter this value as relative to our interests: for example, if I learn that playing golf has value, surely what I am learning is that it has value for *me*, not for everyone (as indeed many would find it boring or frustrating). Not even pleasure has objective value, for if it did, then a given pleasure would have a determinate and measurable amount of objective value, much as a physical object has a determinate and measurable temperature or mass. But we have no idea how to even go about measuring such objective value, and the complex interplay between factors (how much to weigh pleasures from immoral sources? How much to weigh incommensurable-seeming pleasures, like the pleasure of a hot bath versus the pleasure of looking at a work of art? Etc.) strongly suggests that such objective value-measurements do not exist. 'Objective properties, it seems, should be determinate... [but] ordinary physical objects do not admit of determinate degrees of value and... this makes it doubtful that they have objective value at all' (pp. 197, 215). But even if they do, our inability to measure these values renders them practically irrelevant.

Goldman argues that even in the realm of morality we do not encounter objective value, presenting forceful arguments against Michael Smith, Stephen Darwall, Joshua Gert, and others concerning the claim that we are rationally required to have moral concerns. Again, even if there are objective moral facts, this in no way entails that these values address my concerns in a way that gives me a moral reason to act. And given Goldman's definition of rationality in terms of coherence and information, one can certainly have (he argues) a rational (i.e. coherent and relevantly informed) set of desires that does not include moral concerns.

There is much more in Goldman's book—a sophisticated analysis of desire, an argument for how depression undercuts motivation and renders the agent irrational, an argument that the subjectivist account can explain how our lives can be meaningful, and so forth. But let me now turn to some of the potential problems or areas of controversy I see here.

One worry is that Goldman's characterization of objective values (described above) sets up an unduly restrictive choice, a false dichotomy: are these really our only two options—radical subjectivism, that makes even the choice of a moral code a matter of whatever coheres with one's own concerns; and an objectivism that makes values like scientific facts? Isn't there a middle way, in which values are not subjective, but not scientific—are a product of human interaction, human needs, and the need for human society? Consider, as an analogy, a set of rather inescapable norms, which Goldman employs, and which seem to fall into neither the subjectivist nor Goldman-objectivist mold—semantic norms. In using language, and writing

his book, Goldman is bound by semantic norms. Indeed, even his ability to form thoughts with propositional content presupposes that he is bound by the semantic norms which give content to these propositions and their constituent parts. But what is the nature of these norms? They are certainly not subjective, as Goldman understands this term. Nor do we discover linguistic norms as we do scientific facts; so they are not ‘objective’, as Goldman uses this term. It is plausible that the story is somewhere in the middle. But we are inescapably bound by these norms; they are not only for those who are ‘semantically-minded’. Indeed, semantic norms are rather different from moral norms — one must be bound by them to even call them into question in the first place, and in calling them into question, one is using them! And what would it be to do away with them, to cease being ‘semantically-minded’? Indeed, I think we have a model of norms, which give us reasons for doing things and adopting certain modes of thought and language (although as Goldman himself notes, we seldom act with deliberation, and this is certainly true when it comes to following semantic norms), which are neither subjective nor objective (as Goldman uses these terms), and which are inescapable — not merely binding on those who are F-minded.

Goldman briefly considers the idea that there could be social norms, but replies that ‘the acceptance of social norms is dependent on the prior motivations and so, then, are the reasons that follow such acceptance’ (p. 125). As with at least one class of norms, I argue that matters are not quite so simple.

One wonders if the desires of a single individual, rational though they may be (and Goldman is at pains to point out that ‘rational’ ultimately ‘reduces to the non-normative concepts of coherence and information’, p. 35) can really generate normativity. For Goldman, ends are desirable because they are desired (although desired in a complicated, though ultimately naturalizable way): ‘desires for known objects, including basic concerns, provide our only clues as to what is desirable, and so coherence among desires or subjective values is our only indication of what to do’ (p. 257). Despite Goldman’s sophistication, one can’t help but be troubled by the echoes of Mill’s infamous argument: ‘the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it’ (John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 1861/1979, p. 34). But let me introduce a deeper (although related) concern: Goldman, recall, thinks that the building blocks for his theory are naturalistic and free from objective values. On pages 182–3, he argues that an account of practical and epistemic normativity follows from the ‘natural aim’ of desire and belief, which are purely psychological states: ‘Rationality makes the normative demand that we follow them, but again, there is no non-naturalness here. Desires, like beliefs, aim at their own satisfaction, and their natural function is to prompt actions in accord with the reasons that indicate how to satisfy them ... Given aims and the possibility of succeeding or failing in

them, we have normativity; given natural aims, we have natural normativity. What determines what counts as a reason is a basic normative fact, but natural and of internal derivation, not irreducible and external' (p. 183). But a discussion of teleology, and of the purposes and aims of organisms or their constituent parts or states, is unavoidably in the realm of the normative, not the purely descriptive. This fact should be familiar to Goldman, who has himself written extensively on sexual ethics. Many debates in sexual ethics founder on discussions of the 'natural aim' of reproduction or the 'natural function' of the sexual organs. These are questions not settled merely by their evolutionarily-favored activity, but is a question of our own moral values. No, indeed, teleology and value do not come apart; and so when Goldman assumes that a psychological state has a 'natural aim', and that this aim is the same for everyone (and *a priori* so), and that this has normative consequences for *everyone*, he can scarcely do so without himself making a judgment of objective value. And indeed, if teleology determines value, then why not pursue an Aristotelian or natural law view and argue that the coherent, integrated functioning of our bodily systems produces a functioning whole with an aim (or series of aims, not the least of which is survival), and that 'defeat' of this aim is immoral, or irrational? After all, if we are reading normative statuses off of natural aims, there seems little reason to exclude some and include others — if we are investigating matters in a purely even-handed, naturalistic manner, and not importing a prior set of value judgments into things.

No doubt there are a few things Goldman could say at this point. Goldman doesn't think that other natural functionings aside from desire and belief create norms — he writes in 'Plain Sex' that reproduction is sex's 'primary biological function', but that 'while this may be nature's purpose, it need not be ours' (Alan H. Goldman, 'Plain Sex', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6 (1977), pp. 267–87). Goldman owes us a more explicit story about why some 'natural aims' create norms, while others do not. Also, Goldman would claim that even if a norm is universal, it can still be subjective (in Goldman's sense) if it derives from our concerns and desires; so his derivation of normativity from the 'natural aim' of desire does not commit him to objective norms. Nevertheless, it seems as though even if norms depend on our psychological make-up, if they are binding on everyone, then they are plausibly construed as objective, especially if such bindingness is derivable from the very nature of desiring itself, and not on any specific desire anyone might contingently possess. (One can argue this while conceding Goldman's point about subjectivity; Wiggins (David Wiggins, 'Subjective and Objective in Ethics, with Two Postscripts about Truth', *Ratio*, 8 (1995), pp. 243–58) convincingly argues that the categories of objective and subjective cut across each other, and are not mutually exclusive. These considerations may suggest that Goldman's ready identification of externalism and objectivism is a bit too quick.)

Goldman's account will, from the perspective of the objectivist, suffer from other familiar shortcomings — as noted above, Goldman embraces the conclusion that moral reasons are only binding on those who have moral concerns, and these concerns are in no way rationally mandatory. This has long been considered by many an Achilles' heel of subjectivist accounts like Goldman's, but Goldman is willing to bite the bullet here. I suspect that here, Goldman would argue that to see this feature of subjectivism as a shortcoming reveals an objectivist bias, or a longing for a conception of normativity that cannot live up to its own metaphysical and epistemic presuppositions. And indeed, we may have reached one of these fundamental divides in philosophy, between those like Goldman who are satisfied with a modest conception of normativity, and those who think this conception isn't nearly enough. But Goldman makes a powerful case that those in the latter camp cannot ignore, and which will be music to the ears of those in the former.

I am grateful to Michael P. Wolf, Mark LeBar, and Alan H. Goldman for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this review.

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