

On Herbert J. Phillips, “Why Be Rational?”¹

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In recent metaethics, moral realists have advanced a companions-in-guilt argument against moral nihilism. Proponents of this argument hold that the conclusion that there are no categorical normative reasons implies that there are no epistemic reasons. However, if there are no epistemic reasons, there are no epistemic reasons to believe nihilism. Therefore, nihilism is false or no one has epistemic reasons to believe it. While this argument is normally presented as a reply to Mackie, who introduced the term “companions-in-guilt” in his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* of 1977, Herbert J. Phillips presented a form of this argument in this journal in 1940.² In this paper, I will discuss Phillips’ version of the companions-in-guilt argument, demonstrate how recent epistemology bears out an important premise of the argument, and compare Phillips’ argument to Derek Parfit’s recent work.

For Phillips, nihilism is the view that “all judgments of the form ‘ x ought to do y ’ are false for all values of x and y ” (42). This means that “all judgments of the form ‘ x ought to believe p ’ are false for all values of x and p ” (42). Nihilism is thus committed to the conclusion that we have no reason to believe that nihilism is true. To resist this conclusion, Mackie qualifies his position, noting that his error theory is limited to categorical imperatives: reasons for acting that are “unconditional in the sense of not being contingent upon any present desire of the agent to whose satisfaction the recommended action would contribute as a means.”³

Phillips, anticipating Mackie’s later qualification, thus argues that epistemic reasons are categorical, not instrumental. He presents the case of an individual whose sole end is to eat. Suppose that extensive thinking is required before this individual can eat. This requirement

makes thinking purely instrumental to the achievement of a desire. Why does this individual engage in such thinking? It cannot be because he understands that such thinking is a necessary condition of eating, for understanding is not itself a desire and cannot motivate us to act. It cannot be that he desires to do everything that is required in order to eat, for this would far exceed the capacities of normal humans.

To establish the latter claim, Phillips imagines the case of a nonmasochistic person who chooses to see the dentist. This person does not have a drive to see the dentist, for the term “drive” is usually restricted to our ultimate ends. Instead, he is moved by a “tropism” (47). The tropism is not simply a desire, for the individual does not want to see the dentist; he is not a masochist. Phillips also finds it unsatisfactory to say that “it is because he wants to experience the feeling of physical well-being and sees that going to the dentist is a necessary condition to having such an experience” (47). Because the individual lacks a desire to see the dentist and cannot be motivated by the descriptive fact that dental work is a necessary condition for health, the individual must be motivated by a categorical normative fact. The individual who chooses to think in order to eat is also motivated by a categorical normative fact. Therefore, even when we use theoretical reasoning in service of our desires, we must appeal to categorical normative considerations.

Some of Phillips’ argumentation may seem suspect; treating thinking as an act required in order to eat makes theoretical reasoning appear to be an action like any other, though philosophers have often recognized a distinction between belief and action.⁴ Recent epistemology can give us better arguments for the distinction between epistemic and instrumental rationality and thus lend support to Phillips’ view. Thomas Kelly, for example, has argued that we often lack cognitive goals that would give us what we typically take to be

epistemic reasons. He points out the case of a person who has not yet seen a popular movie and wants to avoid learning how the movie ends. Such a person has the cognitive goal of having no beliefs about the movie's ending and thus has an instrumental reason not to believe what his evidence suggests. If given reliable evidence that the movie ends in a particular way, this person acquires an epistemic reason that conflicts with this instrumental reason. Therefore, epistemic reasons cannot simply be instrumental reasons.⁵ Kelly's argument confirms Phillips' view.

For the companions-in-guilt argument to succeed, it must also be shown that theoretical reasoning is a normative process. That is, it must be shown that one must recognize a reason to believe that *p* if she is to be convinced that *p*. To show this, Phillips asks us to imagine an argument with someone about whom all "ought" claims are false. Phillips contends that such a person would be persuaded more by the tone of voice of a speaker than by the soundness of the speaker's argument (43). This person will treat truth and implication merely as parts of a linguistic tradition, not as notions related to what she ought to believe; *ex hypothesi*, there is nothing that she ought to believe. Though she can fully understand our notions of truth and implication, we should find it unsurprising if she failed to believe the conclusions of sound arguments. To recognize the relevance of truth and implication to belief, there must be facts about what we ought to believe.

Phillips thus anticipates an element of Parfit's recent work. Arguing against analytical naturalism, Parfit notes that "the alethic concept *implies the truth of* is quite different from the normative concept *gives us a decisive reason to believe*" (emphasis original).⁶ However, Parfit maintains that "if we know that some argument is valid, and has true premises, these facts give us a decisive reason to accept this argument's conclusion."⁷ Parfit and Phillips agree that we can use the terms "true" and "implies" without invoking normative concepts, but processes of

theoretical reasoning and persuasion require that there be normative reasons. In this way, Phillips' paper is an important and underappreciated precursor to contemporary metaethics.

¹ A retrospective essay on Herbert J. Phillips, “Why Be Rational?” *Ethics* 51:1 (1940), 38-48. All references to sections and page numbers are to this article, unless otherwise noted.

² J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, (1977; repr., London: Penguin, 1990), 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴ Some distinctions between belief and action are highlighted in William P. Alston, “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988), 261, 262, 269, 274.

⁵ Thomas Kelly, “Epistemic Rationality as Instrumental Rationality: a Critique,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66:3 (2003), 626.

⁶ Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 504.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 506.