



**DISCUSSION NOTE**

# ILLUSIONS OF VALUE

BY PETE FOSSEY

JOURNAL OF ETHICS & SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

DISCUSSION NOTE | JULY 2015

URL: [WWW.JESP.ORG](http://WWW.JESP.ORG)

COPYRIGHT © PETE FOSSEY 2015

## Illusions of Value

Pete Fossey

PEOPLE OFTEN DO THINGS THAT THEY JUDGE they ought not to. I judged that I ought to spend yesterday marking essays. The deadline was approaching, there was nothing else I needed to do in that time and I would even say that I was somewhat looking forward to it. Overall, I thought that it was the best thing to do. Yet, when push came to shove, I spent the afternoon watching *Better Call Saul* instead. I was not forced to by uncontrollable urges or by external forces. I decided to, even though I knew I should be marking papers. I simply chose to do something that I knew, all things considered, was not the best option.

How are akratic actions like mine to be explained? It is tempting to say that, although I judged that I ought to be marking, I wanted to watch TV; my wanting to explains my action in spite of my judgment. Finding out that one's desires and one's judgment are in conflict is a depressingly familiar experience, and people at least sometimes do things "because they want to." The idea that desires explain actions, though controversial, is at least well worn. Perhaps akratic actions occur when the subject is led by their desires to act in a way that does not conform to their dispassionate judgment about how they should act.

Derek Baker (2014) and R. Jay Wallace (1999) present a puzzle for anyone who wants to explain akrasia by appeal to desires. When a subject acts akratically and a desire explains their action, either:

- (a) The desire explains their action by exercising a nonnormative influence on their assessment of the reasons (Wallace 1999: 645-46);

or

- (b) The desire explains the subject's action without affecting their assessment of the reasons (Baker 2014: 16).

Either the desire tricks the subject into thinking it presents a stronger reason for action than it really does, or it moves them to action irrespective of how they think they ought to act.

Wallace opts for (a). He claims that akrasia occurs when a quasi-perceptual desire presents its object with such intensity that it clouds the subject's judgment, leading them to judge that the desire presents a stronger reason for action than really it does.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the subject acts on their desire, even though they would be able to see that they should act differently if they could view the situation without the influence of the desire.

Baker objects that, at the time of action, Wallace's subject takes themselves to be acting for the best reason. The mistake the subject

---

<sup>1</sup> This is specifically Wallace's explanation, not shared by all quasi-perceptualists. See, in particular, Tenenbaum (2007, ch. 1).

makes is not that they act for a reason that they take to be outweighed; rather, they weigh the reasons in a way that they would see to be incorrect were it not for their strong desire. This is undeniably a feature of Wallace's account. He argues that the subject must take their desire to be a reason to act, or else their action would not be entirely within their control. Given that the subject acts in the way they want to, what makes the action akratic, on Wallace's account, is the disparity between the way the subject judges the relative weights of reasons when they are in the grip of desire, and the way they would in their more sober moments – not that, at the time of action, they judge their desire to be only an outweighed reason to act.

Baker prefers option (b). Wallace objects that if the akratic action is explained without reference to the subject's assessment of the reasons, then it will turn out that the subject is not fully in control of their action; it seems highly plausible that at least some akratic actions are fully intentional (like my TV watching instead of marking papers), so this account must be in error.

Baker responds to this objection by arguing that this leaves his account no worse off than Wallace's. Both Baker and Wallace ascribe to desires the ability to explain akratic actions through nonnormative influences (i.e., by influencing the subject in some way other than presenting them with a reason for action). Either the subject has the ability to oppose the nonnormative influence of their desires by sheer "force of will," in which case they will not be passive with regard to any of their desires, or else they can only try to bring their desires into line by reasoning about how they ought to act, in which case both (a)- and (b)-type accounts predict that subjects are passive with respect to the desires that explain akratic actions.

As it stands, Wallace's quasi-perceptualist account seems to have an explanatory disadvantage compared to traditional Humeanism, in that it faces a difficulty with regard to explaining akratic action that Humeanism does not face: the illusion of value.

## 1. Traditional Humeanism and Akrasia

If a particular akratic action is intentional, and clearly at least some are, then it must be performed for some reason or other. If akratic actions occur because the subject wants to do something they judge they should not, and if they do so intentionally, then we might expect that the subject's reason for acting will be appropriately related to their desire. For example, the subject might act because they want to, or because the action promises to satisfy their desire.

On Wallace's quasi-perceptualist account, the desire explains the akratic action by forcefully presenting its object as a reason for action. If Wallace is right, then the akratic subject necessarily acts for a desire-based reason (specifically, for a reason based on the desire the distracting influence of which explains their acting akratically, as opposed to any other desire – I will just use "desire-based reason" from now on). The same desire explains the action as intentional, since its content is what the

subject takes to count in favor of acting, and as akratic, through its ability to distract the subject.

Baker's nonrepresentational Humean account neither guarantees that the akratic action is intentional, nor that the reason for which it is performed has anything to do with the desire that explains the action as akratic. All Baker says regarding akratic action is that, by definition, it has to be explained by something other than the subject's assessment of the reasons for acting, and that that "something" is a desire. An action explained in this way must be less than wholly rational, since it cannot be explained purely by appeal to the subject's reasoning; plenty of types of action are rationally defective but not akratic.

Take Freudian slips. A slip occurs when the subject acts (typically, speaks) in a way that does not reflect their decision about how to act, but is consistent with underlying motivations they have that are not accounted for in their assessment of the reasons. The action is therefore purposeful, in that it is regulated by a motive, but not intentional, since it is not performed for a reason (see Velleman 2000: 2-4). Slips differ from akratic actions in that they are necessarily unintended in this sense. So while both slips and akratic actions are performed in spite of the subject's better judgment, akratic actions can be performed intentionally in a way that slips cannot be. Slips, however, would be explained in the way Baker suggests; what explains the subject's action is not their assessment of the reasons for acting, but some further desire. Baker's account does not, therefore, distinguish akratic actions from Freudian slips.

For example, while defending simultaneously cutting public spending on welfare and lowering the top rate of income tax, Prime Minister David Cameron remarked that the Conservatives were "raising more money for the rich" (McSmith 2012). Assuming that he meant to say "raising more money for the poor," or words to that effect, we might explain Cameron's utterance by appeal to his desire to please his party's wealthy backers. If he had this desire, we can understand his utterance as directed at satisfying that desire, but it does not follow that Cameron took the possibility of satisfying this desire to count in favor of saying what he said. Presumably, he did not say he was making more money for the rich for the reason that it would please his paymasters, but his having this desire explains why he said it. Cameron's utterance meets Baker's criteria for akrasia, though it is really a Freudian slip.

One could object that there are such things as slips and compulsive actions, and that they are to be explained in the way Baker's account suggests; the fact that they are not akratic, since they lack some other features not accounted for in the explanation, is no objection to the explanation itself. The suggestion here is that there is a whole class of defective actions of which akratic actions form a subclass, and Baker offers a generic explanation that applies to the whole class. The problem with this response is that it admits that Baker's view only accounts for akratic actions in virtue of their membership of the larger class of defective actions, not in virtue of their distinguishing features.

## 2. Three Humean Responses<sup>2</sup>

a. The Humean could argue that akratic actions exhibit a degree of means-end coherence that is absent in the case of Freudian slips, on account of the fact that akratic actions are motivated by desires and instrumental beliefs, and that this could be a basis by which to tell them apart.

It is not clear, however, that Freudian slips are any less means-end coherent than akratic actions, or that instrumental beliefs are not involved in the explanation of slips. Not just any unintended utterance is a slip; some are just gibberish. What makes an unintended utterance a slip is precisely that making the utterance is the sort of action that promises to satisfy a desire that the subject does not endorse or intend to act on (which is presumably sufficient grounds for attributing to the subject a belief about how to satisfy that desire). In the example above, Cameron's utterance is means-end coherent with his desire to please his wealthy backers. What makes a Freudian slip different from an akratic action is not that the latter has a means-end coherence that the former lacks, but rather that the akratic subject acts as they mean to, whereas the subject of a slip does not.

b. Alternatively, one might claim that the causal connections between desires and Freudian slips are deviant, whereas those between desires and akratic actions are not. Baker's Humean can use this difference to distinguish between slips and akratic actions.

It is not clear, however, that Freudian slips must be aberrantly caused. Roughly, "deviant causation" is what happens when a mental state that could explain an intentional action causes a relevantly similar action to occur, but that action is not susceptible to the kind of explanation distinctive to that sort of mental state. Consider Wilson's waiter, who forms the intention to startle his boss by knocking over a display of wine glasses; he is so rattled by his destructive intention that his hands begin to shake, and he inadvertently topples the display. The waiter's knocking over the display can be explained by reference to his intention to do so, but he did not do so intentionally; so the explanation is not of the sort that usually holds between intentions and intentional actions.

What can we say regarding desires and Freudian slips? Desires explain the actions that tend to satisfy them. When Cameron said that the Tories are making more money for the rich, his saying so was explained by his desire to please his wealthy party donors, even though he did not intend to say it. Is this explanation of the kind that usually holds between desires and actions? Cameron's uttering those words would satisfy his desire, which is why he did so. If that were not the explanation, then the utterance would not be a slip, but a mere misspeaking. The relationship between the desire and the utterance is nondeviant.

---

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to two reviewers at *JESP* for suggesting all of these responses.

c. If Freudian slips are not the product of deviant causation, perhaps they are a species of akratic action. Maybe Baker's Humean is right not to distinguish between them. Perhaps the slipper in fact means to say what they say, but they are only dimly aware of their intention. Then, both the akrates and the slipper will have performed the action they meant to, which was not the one they judged they had the most reason to, and they will have done so because the action in question promises to satisfy one of their desires. If so, then Baker's Humean would have succeeded in offering an explanation of akratic actions as a class, including Freudian slips.

Plausibly, if a theory is forced to eliminate a familiar and useful distinction in order to overcome an objection, then that is a major explanatory cost for anyone adopting that theory. It would be misleading to describe Cameron, for instance, as acting akratically. The claim that he said something that he wanted to say but thought he ought not to seems to falsely characterize the case. He did not mean to say what he said. If Baker's account treats slips as akratic actions, then at the very least he will have to make sense of this distinction in some other way.

### **3. Conclusion**

Whereas Wallace's commitment to explaining actions by appeal to the subject's grasp of the reasons generates the "illusion of value" problem, Baker's refusal to refer to the subject's reasoning leaves him unable to account for the distinctive feature of akratic actions: that they are actions for reasons the subject takes to be outweighed. This is why his account runs together akratic actions and Freudian slips, which are not performed for reasons at all. There is no simple answer to the question of whether traditional Humeanism or quasi-perceptualism is better equipped to account for akrasia.

Pete Fossey  
University of Warwick  
Department of Philosophy  
p.fossey@warwick.ac.uk

## References

- Baker, D. (2014) "The Abductive Case for Humeanism over Quasi-Perceptual Theories of Desire," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* (8)2.
- McSmith, A. (2012) "Cameron at the PMQs: 'We Are Raising Money for the Rich,'" *The Independent*, Dec. 12.
- Tenenbaum, S. (2007) *Appearances of the Good*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Velleman, J. D. (2000) *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wallace, R. J. (1999) "Addiction as a Defect of the Will: Some Philosophical Remarks," *Law and Philosophy* 18(6): 621-54.
- Wilson, George and Shpall, Samuel, "Action," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Summer 2012 edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), [plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/action](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/action).